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Family Unification Program: Housing Services for Homeless Child Welfare–Involved Families

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Abstract

The Family Unification Program—a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development initiative to facilitate interagency collaboration between the child welfare and public housing service systems—aims to stabilize families at risk for parent–child separation by addressing housing needs. Findings from a randomized controlled trial suggest that families referred to the program experienced lower risk for homelessness and out-of-home placement compared with child welfare services as usual. The findings suggest that housing services offer an effective alternative to foster care.

Keywords

homelessness; child welfare; policy; randomized controlled trial; child maltreatment; prevention

Background

Policy Issue and Concern

Inadequate housing represents an endemic challenge to the child welfare system and the families using its services (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Courtney, McMurtry, & Zinn, 2004; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009; Harburger & White, 2004). Each year, more than 3 million families undergo investigation for child maltreatment (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2009). Nationally representative prevalence estimates indicate that inadequate housing threatens child out-of-home placement in one out of six families under investigation for maltreatment, while housing problems delay reunification of children placed in the system for probably twice as many families (Fowler et al., 2013).

Child welfare agencies currently offer few services to address housing needs (Courtney et al., 2004). Child welfare caseworkers lament the lack of options to address the multiple

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needs of inadequately housed families (Courtney et al., 2004; Littell & Schuerman, 2002). A nationally representative study of child welfare-involved families and their caseworkers finds that child welfare workers report spending significantly greater amounts of time on and providing more services to inadequately housed families, compared with other families (Barth et al., 2006). Evidence suggests that housing services received by these families fail to prevent future homelessness or out-of-home placement (Fowler, Taylor, & Rufa, 2011).

Difficulty navigating the intersection between social service systems presents a particular barrier to addressing the housing needs of child welfare-involved families. Child protective services investigations focus on housing only as it pertains to threats for out-of-home placement and not necessarily healthy child development. For example, dilapidated living conditions may be identified as a threat to child safety, whereas repeated relocations indicative of precarious housing may remain unnoticed. Conversely, mandates to protect child safety may comprise housing stability, such as when caregivers must leave abusive romantic relationships or enter treatment programs. Some evidence also suggests that child welfare caseworkers fail to inquire into housing problems because of inability to address identified needs (Courtney et al., 2004). Without sufficient means at their disposal to secure safe and stable housing, caseworkers focus efforts on other challenges that may be less central to family risks. Simultaneously, circumstances surrounding child welfare investigation, such as poverty, violence, and parental mental health problems, impede the ability of families to navigate public housing eligibility procedures (Rog & Buckner, 2007). Some families fail to apply for waitlists, complete applications, follow up on appointments, or lease up in a timely manner, especially during acute periods of family stress and disorganization.

Coordination between child welfare, public housing, and homelessness service systems receives much attention at the federal, state, and local levels, given the costs associated with hard-to-serve families (Cunningham, Popkin, & Burt, 2005). The potential cost savings in terms of tax dollars and human suffering emphasize alternatives to foster care placement. On average, foster care placement costs the federal government \$56,892 annually per family, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2011). This does not account for the substantial expenses associated with HUD-funded homelessness prevention and shelter provided prior to out-of-home placement. By comparison, rental assistance plus supportive services for child welfare-involved families costs \$14,000 per family (Harburger & White, 2004; HUD, 2011). The Obama Administration's emphasis on interagency collaboration and empirically informed budget decision making (Office of Management and Budget, 2012) further highlights the growing intersection between child welfare and housing systems.

Family Unification Program

The Family Unification Program (FUP), a HUD initiative, represents a federal effort to better address the housing needs of families in contact with child welfare agencies (Office of Housing Choice Vouchers, 2012). Initially enacted by Congress in 1992, the FUP denoted a bipartisan effort to stabilize families whose housing threatens costly parent-child separation through child welfare services (White, 2012). The program operates under federal regulation

24 CFR § 982 (Section 8 Tenant-Based Assistance: Housing Choice Voucher Program). The FUP requires formal partnerships through memoranda of understanding between local public housing authorities (PHAs) and public child welfare agencies. Agreements specify how child welfare agencies will identify eligible families and certify a housing need that threatens parent–child separation. Partnerships develop a mechanism to refer families to screening for Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) eligibility by housing authorities.

Program eligibility integrates child welfare and housing criteria. FUP vouchers may be used for three populations: (1) families whose inadequate housing threatens formal out-of-home placement, (2) caregivers whose housing circumstances delay reunification with children already removed into child welfare placements, and (3) youths ages 18 to 21 years who left foster care after age 15 and who lack adequate housing. Inadequate housing as defined by the FUP includes homelessness, imminent risk for eviction, displacement because of domestic violence, substandard or dilapidated living conditions, overcrowded units, and inaccessible housing for disabled children. Families must also be eligible for the HCV program based on local standards agreed upon with HUD. This includes annual gross incomes that fall below thresholds according to fair market rental values by family size, criminal background clearance, absence of arrearages to PHAs, and timely lease-up in approved housing units.

Vouchers are intended to enable eligible families to lease or purchase “decent, safe, and sanitary housing” that is affordable in the private housing market (Office of Housing Choice Vouchers, 2012, p. 1). The responsibility to find housing that meets basic needs and fits program requirements falls to the family. Once a family finds reasonably priced housing that fits quality standards, the PHA executes a contract with the property owner. This contract authorizes the PHA to make subsidy payments on behalf of the family. If the family moves out of the unit, the contract with the owner ends, and the family can move with continued assistance to another unit. The PHA pays the owner the difference between 30% of the family income and the PHA-determined payment standard or gross rent, whichever is lower. The family may choose a unit with a higher rent than the payment standard and pay the owner the difference, but not exceeding 40% of the family’s annual adjusted income. The level of assistance provided to families eligible for Section 8 housing varies among PHAs; the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) makes available a variety of services and programming for low-income families, such as mobility counseling, utility assistance, and connection to employment and education services, that families may choose to use.

Since the inception of the FUP, HUD has chosen 386 public housing–child welfare partnerships across the country and administered 47,159 HCVs for the FUP (National Center for Housing and Child Welfare, 2012). Congress determines funding through annual appropriations acts and requests applications from public housing–child welfare partnerships through a competitive bidding process. Appropriations for the FUP increased between its inception to the early 2000s; however, funding was not appropriated for more vouchers between 2002 and 2008. Funding rates from 2009 to 2011 fell to those of the initial years of the program, and no vouchers were provided in 2012. Given the potential cost savings of the program, a scale-up of the FUP provides a promising alternative to out-of-home placement (Harburger & White, 2004).

Housing Subsidies for Homeless and Child Welfare–Involved Families

Preliminary descriptive studies suggest that housing subsidies may mitigate housing problems among homeless families. A study of nearly 25,000 homeless families in the New York City shelter system examined exit and entry from shelters over 2 years (Wong, Culhane, & Kuhn, 1997). The receipt of subsidized housing significantly reduced the odds of reentry into shelters. A longitudinal study of first-time homeless families showed that receipt of a housing subsidy was the only predictor of residential stability (defined as 12 continuous months in their own apartment) 5 years after initial shelter entry (Shinn et al., 1998); 80% of families who received subsidies were stably housed, compared with 18% of families who did not receive subsidies. The receipt of housing subsidies also distinguishes homeless families from other poor families. In a study of homeless families using shelters and a matched comparison group of low-income but housed families, the receipt of a housing voucher within the year prior to homelessness significantly differentiated the homeless from low-income families (Bassuk et al., 1997). Likewise, the receipt of housing subsidies predicted exit from homelessness among these families.

An initial demonstration showed positive outcomes associated with the FUP. A 31-site study of 995 child welfare families receiving FUP vouchers was conducted in 1993 (Rog, Gilbert-Mongelli, & Lundy, 1998). Families were followed up 12 months after FUP receipt. Families demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of caregiver separation: 90% of families who were initially at risk for out-of-home placement remained intact 12 months later, and approximately 85% of families with children already placed out of home were reunited within the 12-month period. The FUP also showed promising associations with residential stability, with 85% of families stably housed over the entire 12-month follow-up. Although these findings suggest promising effects of housing vouchers on family stability, the absence of a comparison group limits the ability to rule out other plausible explanations for the changes. Families may naturally stabilize over the follow-up period. Additionally, the demonstration may have actively promoted selection effects, in that voucher allocation was based in part on family ability to reunite with children quickly (Rog et al., 1998). Stabilization may be attributed to family motivation and not the FUP. The inability to isolate the influence of the FUP limits the ability to draw strong conclusions with respect to program effects. Existing evidence for use of housing vouchers by at-risk families alludes to beneficial effects; yet, design limitations prohibit stronger conclusions.

Family Housing Study: Randomized Controlled Trial of the FUP in Chicago, Illinois

The Family Housing Study, a project funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, takes advantage of a field experiment to test the effectiveness of the FUP for inadequately housed families under investigation for child maltreatment in Chicago. The study aims to inform social policy and service provision in the child welfare system, while also investigating the processes involved in the relationship between family instability and adverse child development among at-risk families.

The unavailability of affordable housing in Chicago consistently leads to greater demand for housing services in the child welfare and other systems than can be provided. The CHA Family Wait List opened to applications for the first time in 10 years in the summer of 2010.

The CHA reported that 60,000 families applied on the first day, and over 210,000 applications were submitted over a 3-week period. A lottery selected 40,000 families to add to the list, with each family assigned a random position. The length of the list indicates the extensive need for safe and stable housing. Randomization of FUP vouchers offers a fair way to distribute the limited resources and adds to the rigor of research aimed at testing program effects.

In addition to the lack of affordable housing, the long-standing collaboration between the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) and the CHA makes Chicago a premier site for evaluation. Since 1998, the IDCFS and the CHA have partnered to administer FUP vouchers to 700 low-income families in Chicago. The Urban Institute recently recognized this partnership as a model program in a study that examined implementation of the FUP across the United States (Cunningham & Pergamit, 2012). Notably, formal channels of communication exist to facilitate the program. Designated administrators from the IDCFS and the CHA responsible for the FUP program meet on a monthly basis to review the status of all active cases. New referrals are discussed, including anticipation of problems with lease-up (e.g., caregiver criminal history, immigration status issues, or disability considerations). Barriers experienced by families are discussed, such as difficulty with permanency planning, delayed lease-up in PHA-approved housing, or family decisions to release HCVs. Meetings also provide opportunities to share information across agencies regarding local programmatic and political influences, planning for future FUP applications, and systematic issues that challenge services.

The field experiment used in the Family Housing Study allows random assignment of FUP vouchers without denying available services to needy families. Randomization reduces bias in estimates of program effects by balancing across treatment conditions the characteristics and circumstances that predispose certain outcomes from housing assistance. This provides more accurate evaluation of the effect of the FUP. The field experiment was also leveraged to test a developmental ecological model of family homelessness (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is assumed that providing rental assistance to inadequately housed families under investigation for maltreatment will promote healthy child development by limiting risk exposure and promoting family stability. The Family Housing Study aims to use repeated measurement of child mental and physical health, academics, and cognitive development to determine whether the FUP puts children on more positive developmental trajectories. Analyses in this article focus on the proximal impact of the FUP using a preliminary sample of families referred to the program. This article tests whether referral to the FUP can prevent homelessness and out-of-home placement 10 months after application to the program.

This study hypothesizes that referral to the FUP will relate to reduced housing instability (defined as either literal homelessness or precarious housing), compared with families referred to housing services in child welfare as usual. It is also predicted that families referred to the FUP will be less likely to report child out-of-home placement, compared with services as usual. These represent short-term and proximal effects of the FUP with a small initial cohort of intact families whose inadequate housing threatens out-of-home placement in Chicago.

Method

Participants

Participants were families referred to the IDCFS Housing and Cash Assistance Program. All families received services intended to prevent or mitigate family separation solely because of living circumstances and conditions of poverty. The program includes the Housing Advocacy Program (HAP). Administered through contracted community-based social services agencies, the HAP provides case management to help families find affordable housing (Egan, 2007). An initial meeting assesses barriers to securing safe and stable housing, and families receive referrals to domestic and homeless shelters when needed. Advocates educate families on how to conduct housing searches, talk with landlords, budget, and find employment. Families using the Housing and Cash Assistance Program may also receive tangible resources; these include one-time security deposits, furniture, transportation assistance to facilitate moves, food, and clothing. Families apply for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance and public housing as part of the program. The program has been recognized by the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare as a best practice among child welfare agencies.

Families received either housing services as usual through the HAP or these services plus referral to the FUP. Participants were families ($n = 65$) involved in the child welfare system in Chicago, whose inadequate housing threatened out-of-home placement of children in Chicago. Inadequate housing included substandard or dilapidated housing, homelessness, domestic violence situations, overcrowding, or housing that failed to accommodate children's special needs, as identified by IDCFS caseworkers.

The families included in these analyses represent an initial cohort referred to the FUP between July 2011 and December 2011 and followed up with 10 months later. All families were deemed eligible for the FUP by the IDCFS, and only intact families whose children remained in the home at referral were randomized to treatment conditions; families working toward reunification with children already placed in foster care were excluded in this initial cohort because of limited sample size. Of the 84 intact families referred during this time, 65 were surveyed, for an uptake rate of 77%. Families were randomized on a one-to-one ratio at the time of referral by the research team. Treatment families numbered 31, and control families numbered 34, with no significant differences in recruitment. Follow-up interviews occurred with 60 families. This represented a follow-up survey response rate of 92%; of the five noninterviewed families, three could not be located and two did not want to participate in the second interview. The surveyed families represent the population of families referred to and eligible for the FUP in Chicago.

Measures

Family Homelessness—A life-events calendar collected housing time lines for the 3 years preceding the baseline interview. Caregivers recalled all of their living arrangements during this period and provided information on the type of housing, number of rooms, number of residents, presence of children, homelessness, and reason for homelessness. The life-events calendar has been employed in large-scale and longitudinal studies,

demonstrating accuracy and validity for housing and other life events (Belli, Shay, & Stafford, 2001; Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988; Yoshihama & Bybee, 2011). The method has also been used extensively with homeless populations, showing strong psychometric properties in these highly mobile groups (Fowler et al., 2009; McCaskill, Toro, & Wolfe, 1998; Toro et al., 1995). The pre/post tests used in this analysis focused on family living arrangements at the time of the follow-up interview. Type of housing was trichotomized into stable housing (own house, university housing, spouse/partner's place), precarious housing (living with parent, other friends or relatives, pimp or bosses; living in a supervised setting, correctional institute, hospital/rehab), and literal homelessness (shelter, care, bus station, abandoned building, public park, on the street). For these analyses, precarious housing and literal homelessness were collapsed to match the HUD definition of family homelessness ("Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing," 2011).

Out-of-Home Placement—Multiple sources of information on living arrangements between baseline and follow-up coalesced to form a proxy measure of child out-of-home placement. A life-events calendar administered to caregivers at baseline and follow-up gathered parent-reported separations from children, either formally through the courts or informal placement with kin or friends (Belli et al., 2001; Freedman et al., 1988). Life-events calendars were supplemented by IDCFS caseworker reports of placements into foster care between interviews, as well as any indication of parent-child separations made known to study staff while scheduling follow-up interviews with families. For this analysis, out-of-home placement was broadly defined as any indication of formal or informal placement of children away from the primary caregiver. A general time restriction was imposed to include placements 3 months following referral to the program, which represented the average time needed for families to move into housing with Section 8 vouchers. Future work will more precisely define intervention times using CHA administrative data on dates of rent payments. Families who were not interviewed at the follow-up ($n = 5$) had missing information on informal out-of-home living arrangements; it was assumed that children remained with caregivers, given IDCFS caseworker confirmation that none of the children had been placed in formal care. Caseworkers also reported formal placement into foster care during the follow-up; however, this occurred in too few families ($n = 7$) to use as a separate outcome. The proxy of out-of-home placement used in these analyses provides only an initial indication of family stability and should be interpreted with caution.

Demographics—Family characteristics at time of referral, including number of children, dates of referral, and family living conditions, were collected as part of routine IDCFS caseworker referral to the FUP. Surveyed caregivers confirmed this information and provided reports on their functioning as part of an extensive face-to-face interview at baseline.

Procedures

Families whose inadequate housing threatened out-of-home placement were identified by child welfare caseworkers and referred for housing services through existing IDCFS mechanisms. Caseworkers completed applications for the FUP with caregivers; the

applications were reviewed by the director of the Housing and Cash Assistance Program to determine eligibility for the FUP. Eligibility for the study matched eligibility to receive FUP vouchers according to HUD and IDCFS guidelines; families had to meet family income requirements, have an open child welfare case, and lack adequate housing, which threatened to place children into out-of-home care. Families assigned for referral to the FUP received assistance completing standard Section 8 applications from Housing Advocates through the CHA. Families were required to meet standard Section 8 eligibility, which included providing documentation establishing U.S. citizenship and income, in addition to housing and criminal history checks. Families eligible for Section 8 were given 90 days to find suitable housing that passed inspection and met income guidelines. Families were assisted with rental searches and move-in through the CHA and the IDCFS. Accurate data are not yet available to determine the outcome of housing searches; regardless, families remained in the assigned treatment and control conditions to provide a conservative test of program effects.

All eligible families were randomized and then recruited to participate in the study after the IDCFS established FUP eligibility. This procedure reduced potential treatment-related differences on initial assessments and permits evaluation of differential attrition effects (Graham & Donaldson, 1993). Research staff used trickle process batch randomization on a one-to-one ratio (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Instead of randomizing families at one time, this design allowed for randomization to treatment condition within small groups (ranging in size from two to nine families) that reflected caseworker referral practices.

The initial design of the Family Housing Study intended to use the CHA lottery to randomly assign families to receive services as usual either with or without FUP; however, zero IDCFS-involved families appeared on the CHA waitlist at the beginning of the study, and less than 10 recently investigated families had CHA waitlist numbers. This may reflect the low odds of the lottery to get on the waitlist, as well as suspected difficulty that very marginalized families had navigating the online application newly implemented by the CHA in 2010. In prior years, hundreds of IDCFS-involved families appeared on the CHA waitlist at any given time. Concern has been raised that the online application presented an overwhelming barrier to families with little exposure to computers or access to the Internet (Piemonte, 2010).

This study used information provided by child welfare caseworkers included in the referral to the FUP, as well as caregiver surveys. All caregivers completed a baseline panel survey approximately 4 months after referral to the FUP, and a follow-up 10 months after referral. Caregiver surveys assessed multiple aspects of child and family functioning, such as housing and living arrangement time lines, caregiver and child mental health, exposure to violence, and family communication. Children were assessed on cognitive development, academic attainment, and mental and physical health; however, these data were not used in this analysis. Two-person interview teams conducted assessments with caregivers and up to five children in the home ages 0 to 15 years at baseline. Caregivers received \$50 cash and children received \$10 gift certificates as compensation for their time.

Retention was strong between baseline and the follow-up interview: 86% of families were interviewed at both times. The small sample size of this initial cohort of families prohibited

meaningful tests of differential attrition; nor could formal approaches to missing data, such as multiple imputation, be used reliably. Anecdotally, no patterns to missingness seemed readily apparent from the data.

Analyses

Initial analyses examined the validity of random assignment. Regressions compared treatment and control families on an extensive array of variables that may distort family stability outcomes. Regression analyses were estimated separately for each predictor to determine unique threats to the integrity of randomization and to minimize missing data. A model that included all independent variables produced similar results and is not presented. Main analyses used intent-to-treat analyses to examine the impact of the FUP on outcomes; families remained in the treatment condition as originally assigned even though some families referred to the FUP had yet to receive Section 8 vouchers. This provided a conservative and unbiased estimate of impact.

Results

Preliminary analyses examined the integrity of randomization. A literature review identified important variables that precipitate family homelessness and parent–child separation (Bassuk et al., 1997; National Research Council, 1993). Table 1 presents baseline characteristics of the families by treatment condition; no significant differences existed between families referred to the FUP or to services as usual on any observed variable. This supports the validity of the randomization procedures and suggests unbiased estimates of program effects based on preexisting selective processes. Analyses also indicated that no significant differences existed between surveyed and unsurveyed families on information collected by IDCFS caseworkers at the time of referral to the FUP, including caregiver and child ages, family size, family income, and types of housing risks.

Approximately one out of five families experienced homelessness (22%), with two families on the street at the time of follow-up and 13 precariously housed. A similar rate occurred for out-of-home placement (23%) in the full sample. Main analyses tested the impact of the FUP on homelessness and out-of-home placement at follow-up. Logistic regression models conditioned each outcome on treatment assignment. Table 2 displays the results. On homelessness at follow-up, families referred to the FUP were significantly less likely to report living in precarious housing or literal homelessness situations ($b = -1.79$, standard error = 0.71, $p < .05$).

To test program effects on out-of-home placement, a binary indicator of whether any child in the home had been removed for any period of time between 3 months postrandomization and follow-up interview was regressed on treatment condition. The p -value for this analysis was set to .10, given *a priori* power calculations that suggested ability to detect anticipated small effects among intact families with double the sample size available in the initial cohort used in this preliminary analysis. A trend toward significance was found, with families referred to the FUP being less likely to experience out-of-home placement ($b = -1.03$, standard error = 0.66, $p = .11$).

Discussion

This study provides preliminary evidence for the utility of providing subsidized rental assistance as a way to keep child welfare-involved families housed and together in the short term in Chicago. Findings show a pattern similar to a prior multisite evaluation of the FUP that showed high rates of stabilization at a 12-month follow-up (Rog et al., 1998). The use of random assignment suggests that the effects are not explained by preexisting differences among families (prior to referral to the program). Furthermore, comparison with an active control group who received tangible housing resources minus rent subsidy offers a conservative estimate of potential program effects; evaluations made with a waitlist control or no services control may demonstrate larger impact. These findings add to a growing body of research that shows a relationship between affordable housing and family stabilization (Bassuk et al., 1997; Shinn et al., 2008; Wong et al., 1997).

Caution must be used when interpreting these preliminary results. It is promising that significant differences were found between treatment conditions with such a limited sample size and thus power. This suggests that the impact of the FUP on proximal outcomes of housing and unification may be of considerable magnitude. However, the time frame and methods used to define outcomes introduce unreliability into estimates of program effects. The follow-up period of 10 months provides little understanding of the longer-term ability of housing assistance to support families, and the beneficial effects of housing stabilization may increase over time. Likewise, the single timepoint fails to capture extensively the influence of fluctuations in housing and family changes. This may underestimate the size of program effects. In addition, imprecise measures of housing and family instability introduce unreliability in estimates. For instance, “precarious housing” lumps together different living circumstances (e.g., residing with a parent versus with pimps), possibly hiding meaningful variation. Out-of-home placement also collapsed formal and informal placements that have important implications for estimating the cost-effectiveness of services. Limited sample size compounds these limitations. Future analyses that use a longitudinal design and repeated measurements with more complete data will provide a more thorough understanding of program impact. Availability of additional information on family instability provides an opportunity to capture meaningful patterns across time that may change with receipt of the FUP.

Preliminary estimates also do not explicitly address the meaningfulness of effects in terms of cost savings to social services systems. Importantly, out-of-home placement primarily refers to informal and temporary living arrangements; it does not address more expensive foster care placements. Although findings suggest more instability among families in the control condition, it is unclear what services families consume to address this volatility, such as homelessness services, foster care, or criminal justice system involvement. We also do not have estimates of service usage for FUP families, including the cost of the Section 8 voucher. Future work will augment analyses using administrative data from the Integrated Database on Child and Family Programs. This is a longitudinal database compiled from information collected by public agencies serving children and families in Illinois (Goerge, 1994). Linkages across multiple service systems will be used to generate reliable estimates of the cost-effectiveness of the FUP. These include child welfare services, public housing,

mental and physical health, juvenile justice, and other public agencies that provide approval to use data. Linked data will also better identify families referred to the FUP who did not receive vouchers; anecdotally, the IDCFS worried whether changes in CHA policy implemented during the study (including a reduction in the number of days provided to secure housing with vouchers) may reduce voucher uptake. Future analyses that test the impact of actually receiving FUP subsidies will augment intent-to-treat analyses and provide useful information on program impact.

Importantly, the present analyses do not test whether stabilization of families promotes healthy child development. A growing body of literature demonstrates the negative impact of inadequate housing—including mobility, dilapidated conditions, and overcrowding—on child mental and physical health and academic attainment (Evans, 2006; Fowler, Henry, Schoeny, Taylor, & Chavira, 2014; Leventhal & Newman, 2010). This field experiment offers a unique opportunity to determine what happens to children when these conditions improve, and we can examine the mechanisms through which effects are generated. Findings will greatly inform both developmental theory and programmatic and public policy in regard to connections between family homelessness and child welfare involvement.

Findings from this study only represent Chicago, which has a relatively supportive child welfare system that actively attempts to connect families to housing. Other larger metropolitan areas with challenging affordable housing markets may find similar effects. Studies that examine the FUP in more rural areas would be of great interest, given that the benefits of the program, especially cost-effectiveness, may be different. In addition, this study does not include families whose inadequate housing delays reunification with children already placed into formal out-of-home settings. It is very important to understand the impact of housing subsidies with these families, given their greater risk for family separation (Courtney et al., 2004; Fowler et al., 2013). An early demonstration of the FUP in multiple sites across the United States suggests especially high rates of reunification (62% across sites), while most states struggle to return children to families in a timely manner (Rog et al., 1998). It may be that the FUP provides a particularly useful option with these very-hard-to-house families; yet, the risk margin increases because caregivers would consume sparse Section 8 vouchers even if children never return to the home.

This work provides an important initial picture of how subsidized housing may help child welfare-involved families. Preliminary findings add to prior research suggesting that further investment in the FUP could assist consistently hard-to-serve homeless families achieve stability over time (Rog et al., 1998). The program remains unfunded since fiscal year 2011, and prior allotments fail to meet the demand for affordable housing among child welfare-involved families (Fowler et al., 2013). Much remains to be learned about integrating housing services within the child welfare system; however, early evidence supports further attempts to implement services. Rigorously designed studies of the FUP and other housing interventions implemented within child welfare promise to inform evidence-based program development.

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Table 1

Logistic regression models comparing baseline characteristics of families by treatment condition.

	Family Unification Program (<i>n</i> = 31)	Housing services as usual (<i>n</i> = 34)	Referent category	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>
<i>Caregiver sociodemographic characteristics^a</i>					
Age in years	32.81 (9.10)	31.35 (8.38)	–	–	.42
Gender	93.5	100.0	Male	<0.001	1
African American	75.0	69.7	Other	0.77	.65
White	21.4	27.3	Other	1.38	.60
Asian/Native American	3.6	0.0	Other	<0.001	1
Hispanic	16.1	14.7	Other	0.90	.88
High school dropout %	71.0	61.8	Graduate	0.66	.44
Married %	6.5	5.9	Other	0.91	.92
Divorced/separated/widowed %	29.0	17.6	Other	0.52	.28
Never married %	64.5	76.5	Other	1.79	.29
<i>Family characteristics</i>					
Number of children in home	3.13 (1.95)	2.50 (2.08)	–	–	.21
Families with 0–2-year-olds %	64.5	58.8	None	0.83	.71
Families with 3–5-year-olds %	51.6	35.3	None	0.88	.80
Families with 6–10-year-olds %	45.2	44.1	None	0.75	.57
Families with 11–15-year-olds %	29.0	26.5	None	1.04	.95
<i>Housing risks^b</i>					
Substandard housing %	22.6	14.7	No	0.59	.42
Dilapidated housing %	22.6	5.9	No	0.21	.07
Overcrowded housing %	71.0	58.8	No	0.58	.31
Living in shelter %	16.1	32.4	No	2.49	.14
Fleeing domestic violence %	6.5	14.7	No	2.50	.30
Bedrooms needed	2.96 (0.999)	2.65 (0.798)	–	–	.18
Monthly income	\$767 (\$525)	\$822 (\$541)	–	–	.69
<i>Caregiver well-being characteristics^a</i>					
Sadness ^c %	32.3	35.3	No	0.87	.80
Ever arrested ^d %	40.0	35.5	No	0.83	.72

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	Family Unification Program (<i>n</i> = 31)	Housing services as usual (<i>n</i> = 34)	Referent category	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>
Alcohol dependence ^e %	54.8	61.8	No	1.33	.57
Drug dependence ^f %	12.9	17.6	No	1.45	.60
Ever hospitalized drug/alcohol %	3.2	8.8	No	2.90	.37
Ever hospitalized mental health %	9.7	17.6	No	2.00	.36
Ever hospitalized illness/injury %	16.1	23.5	No	1.60	.46

Note. Percentages or means (standard deviations) presented within each treatment condition.

^aCaregiver demographics and well-being collected as part of head-of-household interviews.

^bHousing risks reported by child welfare caseworkers at time of referral to the Family Unification Program.

^cCaregiver reported feelings of sadness for a period of 2 weeks or more in the past 12 months, measured by the Beck Depression Inventory.

^dSelf-reported criminal histories.

^eReport of eight or more symptoms in the past 12 months on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test indicating hazardous drinking patterns.

^fCaregiver indication of five or more symptoms in the past 12 months on the Drug Abuse Screening Test indicating clinically significant problems.

Table 2

Logistic regression models comparing families randomly referred to the Family Unification Program or services as usual on homelessness and out-of-home placement.

Variable	Family Unification Program (<i>n</i> = 31)	Housing services as usual (<i>n</i> = 34)	Referent	Odds ratio	<i>p</i>
Family homelessness %	10.0	40.0	Stably housed	0.17	.01 *
Out-of-home placement %	12.9	29.4	In home	0.41	.11 †

† *p* < .15.
* *p* < .05.