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Housing decisions among homeless families involved in the child welfare system

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Abstract

The present study embedded a qualitative sub-study within a randomized controlled trial of housing services for child welfare-involved families to examine housing decisions made in the face of homelessness and child protection. Participants included a representative sample of caregivers ($n = 19$) randomized to receive the Family Unification Program – a permanent housing intervention for inadequately housed families under investigation for child abuse or neglect – or child welfare services-as-usual. Qualitative interviews 12 months after randomization assessed housing decision-making processes involved in keeping families safe and stable. Results indicated a push-pull dynamic that constrained housing choices regardless of whether permanent housing was made available. Caregiver housing decisions were constrained by time limitations, affordability, and access to services, while child and family safety was perceived as less important. Findings emphasize the need for housing informed child welfare services to ensure the long-term safety of children in families experiencing homelessness.

Keywords

homelessness; permanent housing; child welfare; housing decision making

Introduction

Homelessness and inadequate housing situations, marked by such issues as physical problems or crowding, pose significant barriers for families involved in the child welfare system to achieve long-term family reunification. In addition, these families face considerable challenges when making housing decisions with limited access to resources. The present range of housing services for child welfare-involved families report promising preliminary outcomes, and suggest cost-saving benefits. However, serious limitations in accessing and utilizing supportive housing services remain, as child welfare-involved families display different priorities when making housing decisions. Therefore, this study aims to examine how families in child welfare who are provided with housing vouchers make housing decisions, particularly with regards to the role of safety, in a large metropolitan area in the United States. This information will provide a means of improving

current housing interventions that pave the way to promote child safety as well as prevent unnecessary child separation from families.

Homelessness and child welfare

Recent research has drawn attention to the link between housing instability and child welfare involvement for families. Using data from a national survey of families involved with the child welfare system, Fowler and colleagues (2013) estimated that for families at-risk of their child being placed out-of-home, approximately 16% of families reported that inadequate housing contributed to the risk of removal from the home. Moreover, a larger proportion of families whose children were removed from the home by the child welfare system experienced housing instability that delayed reunification (Courtney, McMurtry, & Zinn, 2004; Fowler et al., 2013). There is clear evidence suggesting that families struggling with housing instability face additional challenges in the child welfare system, and this is of major concern.

Families who are inadequately housed and homeless are likely to experience a multitude of difficulties in addition to deep poverty. To further disentangle the factors contributing to child welfare involvement for families experiencing homelessness, studies have compared these families with low-income but housed families. In a one-year birth cohort study conducted in Philadelphia, lasting for five years, researchers found that 37% of mothers who had at least one report of homelessness since their child's birth were also involved in child protective services, a percentage much greater than those families who were low-income but housed (9.2%) and all other participants (4%) (Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003). Similar findings were found in another study, with 44% of mothers identified as homeless having experienced separation from one or more of their children compared to 8% of poor-but-housed mothers (Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002). These findings suggest a direct relationship between housing instability and child welfare without a family's low-income status acting as an intermediary.

Housing standards set by child protective services often require housing to be not only physically and structurally safe, but also to have sufficient room for a child to reside. Families who are able to "double up" with other family or friends still may not meet criteria necessary for their children to return to their care (Shdaimah, 2009). Font and Warren (2013) found that families who had reported homelessness or doubling up were no more likely to have a case substantiated, referring to child welfare services finding allegations of child abuse or neglect to be true; however, for those families who did have a case substantiated and were inadequately housed, they were less likely to have their case closed within the child welfare system. It is possible the cases remained open due to need, as these families were more likely to receive and use provided services (Font & Warren, 2013). At times, services may prove successful for all other needs and yet families, their caseworkers, and other advocates still struggle to find them housing, such that the families are ready for reunification yet have no home in which to do so (Shdaimah, 2009).

Housing interventions in child welfare

Housing services provided within the child welfare system have recently gained more attention from research and policy makers (ACF/HUD, 2014). A national study of child welfare-involved families found inadequately housed families received few housing services, and those who did had poorer child welfare outcomes over time compared with similar families who did not receive services (Fowler, Taylor, & Rufa, 2011). Supportive housing initiatives that connect child welfare-involved families experiencing homelessness with housing plus additional supportive services have shown more promise in preliminary observational studies (Farrell, Britner, Guzzardo, & Goodrich, 2010; Hong & Piescher, 2012). A study of 1,717 child welfare-involved families referred for supportive housing services over 10 years (1999-2008) in Connecticut found 73% of families were deemed “successful” at discharge, defined by an overall improved situation including readiness for family reunification and secured permanent housing. A study in Minnesota indicated families using supportive housing services had decreased involvement with child protective services overall, compared to families experiencing homelessness who had no change in involvement (Hong & Piescher, 2012).

Another housing intervention provides permanent housing for child welfare families across the U.S. Initiated in 1992, the Family Unification Program (FUP) is funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and aims to promote coordination between child welfare and public housing agencies (Turner & Kingsley, 2008). Families whose child welfare involvement is either directly related to inadequate housing or homelessness, or those whose housing situation delays reunification of families, are referred for the Housing Choice Voucher Program (formerly Section 8). Voucher assistance allows families to choose housing and the program will pay the balance of the cost exceeding 30% of their income, with limits based on the Fair Market Rent and the number of bedrooms. The program aims to allow families to remain together and mitigate the expensive costs of foster care (Turner & Kingsley, 2008). Although more extensive research is necessary to identify outcomes, initial evidence of FUP suggests families exhibit less housing mobility and potentially fewer out-of-home placements compared with inadequately housed families under investigation who do not receive vouchers (Fowler & Chavira, 2014; Pergamit, Cunningham, & Devon, 2017; Rog, Gilbert-Mongelli, & Lundy, 1998).

The promise of emerging evidence-based housing interventions in child welfare enhances the importance of identifying decision-making processes used by families navigating housing and family instability. Navigating homelessness requires a complex calculus that demands balancing both current and future risks versus opportunities. The process has generated unexpected and unintended consequences for service provision. For example, use of available and provided services (i.e., uptake) has been lower than expected across large experiments that provide families access to subsidized housing. Despite access to affordable and quality accommodations, a substantial portion of families in tenant-based public housing projects refused vouchers, especially when required to move out of low-income neighborhoods (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). Families experiencing homelessness also refuse short- and long-term housing accommodations when offered (Gubits et al., 2013). Moreover, families continued to move frequently after securing housing with vouchers (Gubits et al.,

2013; Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). Continued instability has raised questions regarding how best to provide housing services.

Qualitative research has begun to explore factors that influence housing decisions among low-income families. Studies have consistently shown that families emphasize location as a primary consideration in housing (Boyd et al., 2011; Fischer et al., 2014; Pashup et al., 2005; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012; Varady & Walker, 2000). Broadly speaking, families prefer to live in areas with which they are familiar, where they can be close to what and who they know and in which they are comfortable and able to navigate (Boyd et al., 2011; Fischer et al., 2014; Pashup et al., 2005; Varady & Walker, 2000). Thus, location considerations encompassed access to both tangible (e.g., transportation, employment, schools) and intangible (e.g., social support, family, neighbors) resources. Conversely, families have reported neighborhood safety as a primary motivation to use vouchers (Pashup et al., 2005; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012). A study of Moving To Opportunity families found that families hoped for safer neighborhoods in which to raise their children, where they did not have to worry as much about their children playing outside or going to school (Pashup et al., 2005; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012).

Landlord relationships and housing characteristics have also been found to influence decisions to move (Boyd et al., 2011; Desmond, 2016). A qualitative study of families who were provided vouchers that could only be used in identified opportunity areas found 68% of those who moved within a year of voucher receipt cited problems with their landlord as a main reason for relocating, while those who remained housed reported the opposite stating positive relationships with landlords (Boyd et al., 2011). Issues ranged from poorly maintaining or being unresponsive to maintenance needs to being too intrusive, and some reported their landlords refused to renew their lease or sold the building to someone who was unwilling to continue leasing to them (Boyd et al., 2011). In addition to basic conditions, families have reported space constraints as a pressure to move and consideration in housing choices (Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012). Thus, a family may find housing in a preferred location with a landlord they like, but may be unable to afford a home with enough bedrooms for all occupants.

Child welfare-involved families face unique challenges and considerations when choosing what services to use and where to live. Families struggle not only with their own needs and barriers facing low-income families obtaining housing, but also experience the added burden of making decisions that will allow them to keep their family intact. With this added consideration, it is possible they will make decisions somewhat differently as they navigate unique considerations and trade-offs. Potentially different prioritizations could influence how families handle risk and make compromises based on family stability.

A better understanding of housing decision-making processes for child welfare-involved families provides an opportunity to enhance housing services. Lessons can inform if and how housing assistance must be tailored to address unique needs associated with child separation. Moreover, intensive housing interventions require substantial resources, and assistance is not available for all families in need (Carlson, Haveman, Kaplan, & Wolfe, 2012). It is important to understand how families address housing needs with access to

vouchers and when only provided case management. Insights could help inform when families are at greatest risk and how to provide useful resources in the absence of rental assistance that keep children safe.

Present study

The present study takes advantage of a field experiment to understand how families choose housing, and what role safety had in their decisions. Families under investigation by the child welfare system were randomly assigned to receive FUP plus case management or case management alone. Semi-structured interviews assessed experiences securing housing among randomly selected caregivers interviewed 12-months after referral for FUP. The study addressed the following research question: What factors do inadequately housed caregivers describe as important when making housing choices with FUP assistance or services-as-usual provided through the child welfare system?

Method

Participants

A randomized controlled trial compared 75 intact families who received child welfare services plus referral to the Family Unification Program (FUP) to a control condition of intact families eligible for FUP who received services-as-usual ($n = 75$). A randomly selected subsample of caregivers participated in a qualitative interview approximately 12 months after randomization. Eligibility for the study matched eligibility to receive FUP vouchers according to HUD guidelines; families met family income requirements, had an open child welfare case, and lacked adequate housing that threatened to place children into out-of-home care. Included caregivers were required to be primarily English-speaking, as qualitative interviewers were not fluent in Spanish. Caregivers were recruited from both the group assigned to receive vouchers and the group receiving services as usual.

Procedure

Qualitative interviews were conducted among a randomly selected subset of families participating in the panel study. Caregivers were selected for participation using a stratified random selection procedure that balanced families on treatment assignment (FUP or child welfare services-as-usual), as well as month of recruitment into the parent study (October, 2011 through March, 2012) to ensure variation in experiences with FUP and address potential systematic differences related to when families were interviewed. Study staff recruited families over the phone and through home visits. Families were recruited until the sample goal of 20 participants was met. In-home face-to-face interviews were conducted and participants were compensated with \$40 gift cards in appreciation for their time. In addition to the primary interviewer, a second interviewer was also present to gather field notes and provide a second set of ears to ensure all questions were asked and information was gathered thoroughly. Field notes included possible emerging themes, behavioral observations of the participant, as well as notes about the structure of the interview. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed through a professional and confidential transcription service. The study complied with ethical procedures involved in human subjects research and was approved by university institutional review boards.

Instrument

Qualitative interviews followed a semi-structured guide with questions developed by the principal investigator, research staff, and community representatives. The interview guide included open-ended questions about housing arrangements and housing services. Families were asked about housing choices they made over the course of the study and what trade-offs they made during the decision-making process. The interview protocol was tested with research staff and study consultants to verify the clarity of the language and garner suggestions about the appropriateness of the questions.

Analytic Approach

Analysis of qualitative data was completed with steps inspired by grounded theory to identify key themes between respondents. Analysis followed the following phases: initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006). In the first phase of coding, coders went line by line to identify and label emerging phenomena and themes found in the text. During the second phase, the initial codes were reviewed and particularly prevalent codes identified and discussed between the two coders. The third phase of coding consisted of reviewing the themes from the second phase and fitting them together, with some themes nesting under more prominent, core themes to explain the phenomena being addressed. Throughout the coding process, qualitative interviews for families that received the housing choice voucher were coded together with families that received housing services-as-usual. Treatment conditions were coded together to allow the emergence of themes across all participants, as well as to allow for themes to emerge specific to treatment group. Coding was completed using NVivo data analysis software. Benefits of using this software were ease of collecting and sorting codes.

Results

The qualitative study interviewed randomly selected caregivers after the 12-month follow-up survey. As shown in Table 1, racial composition differed in caregivers who participated in qualitative interviews plus surveys ($n = 19$) and those who participated in surveys only ($n = 131$), with fewer Latina participants and more White caregivers who completed qualitative interviews. This difference is likely related to inclusion criteria for participation in the qualitative study to those who were primarily English-speaking, thus potentially excluding primarily Spanish-speaking Latina caregivers. No other significant baseline differences existed in demographic characteristics between groups. Caregivers were primarily African American single mothers in their early 30's.

Analyses examined how child welfare-involved caregivers evaluated housing options. Results suggested three broad themes emerged as key factors in decisions: timing and availability, unaffordable housing markets, and decisions based on access to routines and various types of support (i.e., services and social support). Table 2 summarizes themes and subthemes described below.

Timing and availability

Last minute decisions.—Due to the occasional urgency participants reported in finding housing, many found themselves making last minute decisions to accept their current home. The reasons for needing housing quickly were widespread. Angela, a woman who previously lived with her children's father's parents, described her current housing as an "emergency apartment" due to ending the relationship with her children's father. She went on to say, "it was, um, really fast thing that I just wanted to get out of here. I don't want to deal with the situation. I don't even care what it was." Yvette similarly described her housing as an "all-of-a-sudden apartment." While timing was particularly relevant to those bound by the restrictions of the housing vouchers, various factors in previous housing played a role in the timeframe with which participants were able to search for a home. The difficulties listed above often combined to create a difficult and time-limited housing search, in which participants found they had to leave or lost previous housing and ultimately chose whatever option was best in the time they had.

Many who reported their current apartment was a last minute decision also went on to state that they were planning to move again. Often, this appeared to be related to having to find a place quickly, without much time to consider other factors. Sarah summed this pattern up when she said, "since I couldn't find nothin' I got to take whatever I was getting. I really don't like it here. I'm already lookin' for somewhere else to move. It's not a good place for me." Some appeared to see the current housing as a transitory setting, such as Tiffany, who had previously been in a shelter. She noted:

...the main thing was being able to be out of that shelter when I chose this place. But I already knew that it was it was gonna be – you know, I wouldn't be here for long. So before I even moved in." Marla, who had to move back in with her mother, said she was "going to be moving out because of the, you know, for, for me and my son.

Lack of options.—Participants tended to have difficulty responding to some questions, because many stated they felt they were out of options or otherwise constricted. Those who opted to live with family often had not received a housing voucher and were not able to afford housing otherwise. Hence, they felt they did not have any options other than to live with family members. When prompted with various factors that may have contributed to the decision, Gwen repeatedly responded, "Wasn't an option" after explaining that she chose to live with family to help with costs, and given their space felt it "wouldn't be too combative." Additionally, some of those who did not receive housing vouchers felt as though they were stuck, unable to afford rent otherwise and not receiving any services once their DCFS cases closed. Limited choices were also clear in how participants reacted to our questions. For example, we asked participants if it was a hard or easy choice to live in their current housing, which many stated was some combination of the two. The choice was easy because they had no other options, or it was hard because the housing did not fit their preferences, but they had no other choice. This confusion was perhaps most clear when asked what trade-offs the family made in choosing their housing. While we described and defined what we meant by a trade-off, many were unable to identify any. Instead, participants would note that their housing was all-around better or worse. In some instances, families denied making

trade-offs; however, they described prioritizing cost or timing over other choices. It is possible that these choices were not perceived as options, but rather as necessities.

Unaffordable housing market

Cost.—Many noted that in general the rent in Chicago is high and difficult to afford. Both Barbara and Tracy, who received housing vouchers, described the cost of housing as “ridiculous,” indicating why it was important for them to receive assistance. Cost was described as the most important factor causing caregivers to make the decision to live with family, while at times made them feel they had no other options. Gwen was living with her family and noted that although she contributed to the funds, living with family could be free and they were willing to work with her: “I don’t have any money, so I needed some kind of assistance or someone that was gonna assist me.” Similarly, Candace, who was homeless before her mother invited her to move in with her two years before noted that she contributed to the household but did not pay rent due to unemployment: “...I get Illinois Link. So I provide all the food for the house and like I’ll – I, um, I provide the food and I pay the cable bill every month But, uh, as far as rent, no, I don’t pay.” Without assistance, many struggled to find and maintain housing.

Participants also noted cost as important in the hopes of saving money, particularly to spend on their children. Sarah noted that the little extra money she may have each month is spent on her children: “It’s kinda hard, working whatever little money I do get, but I got the budget; I’m always broke once I pay my rent and whatever bills. I never have none left. It’s spent on my kids.” Angela described the importance to her of providing financially for her children, such that she delayed plans to move until after the holidays, stating, “Cause when Santa Claus comes, if Santa Claus comes, then the budget gets tighter, a little bit.”

Space.—Space mattered to parents for a variety of reasons. Some described the hardships of living in overcrowded accommodations. Candace had been living with her mother for approximately two years after becoming pregnant while homeless. She noted, “...it’s a one-bedroom apartment with three people, and four when my son comes, so it’s very tight.” In her case, she slept on a pull-out couch while her daughter slept in a crib, both in the living room. Gwen, who was living with family after losing her job and own apartment said, “... we’re resigned to one bedroom together, and my son sleeps on the couch, in a chair, or something else.” For some, there were enough bedrooms, yet simply having so many people in one home created clutter in the living spaces, as was the case for Marla: “But it’s just crowded; there’s like a lot of stuff. There’s like, um, my clothes on top of the table; it’s just getting crowded in here.”

Parents consistently note that they wanted their children to have space and their own toys. It was important for some parents that their children have their own rooms, as was the case for Carol: “We need three bedrooms and we couldn’t – we were looking and we found one that was a two bedroom, but I couldn’t go with that; I had my daughter needs a room and my son needs a room, so.” While she had difficulty affording the apartment, this was important to Carol. This was particularly true for parents who lived in a shelter at some point, or living with other families where their children had to share space and toys. Monique stated that

while she was living in the shelter, a rule was to share whatever was brought in: “I couldn’t even bring in – like if my kids wanted to drink some juice, I couldn’t even bring them a juice in, uh, because they’re like, ‘Oh, well you need to bring in some for everybody.’” The desire to have space thus appeared to be in part due to what the participants wanted for their children.

Space tended to be important to parents as a means of increased privacy and independence, benefiting caregivers’ own well-being. For example, space is often lacking when participants are living with family, and as such many report difficulties with emotional and mental health. Monique lived with her family and noted that even with ample space it is still a difficult situation in which to be: “They help me by letting me live here, but every day they let me know that they don’t want me here. ... I mean, it’s a big place, but physically it’s big, but mentally it’s very small.” As Gwen said, “I’m not happy. I’m used to living on my own and my kids having their own rooms...So, and grown people need to have their own.”

Poor housing quality.—The quality of housing was often described as being quite poor, and a reason families chose or had to move. For some, conditions were such that they or their DCFS caseworker deemed the housing inappropriate or unsafe. Katherine, who received a housing voucher through DCFS, said, “...I mean the apartment that I was in it used to flood...Because of the flood, that’s why I guess DCFS stepped in and moved me and my family out because of, because of the water damage.” Another, Jaqueline, had to leave a previous living situation because there was no hot water, and as she noted, “And you know if there’s no hot water there’s not any heat.” The concerns with quality many participants had were not an issue of appeal, but rather health and safety needs. On rare occasions, a participant identified good quality as a reason they chose their housing; unfortunately, many reported their initial impressions changed, with growing disappointment in the quality of their housing. Samantha moved quickly due to safety concerns and initially found the housing to be of acceptable quality, but stated, “Later, I found it was like real cosmetic, though... The outside’s nice, but up under all this, it’s just like cheap crap.” For this participant, the growing quality concerns were made worse as the property management and landlords were described as inattentive.

Many others concurred that part of the problem with the housing quality was the lack of attention to maintenance. Participants described water heaters that did not work, trouble with vermin, or stairs that appeared to lack stability. Along with these issues often came difficulties communicating with the landlord or others in charge of maintenance of the home. Yvette was content with her previous housing, but was forced to move when the landlord “...wanted to sell the house...She was just, you know, rushin’ me to move, pressuring me, so, you know, I left.” While quality issues were a concern, they almost inevitably coincided with unresponsive property managers or poor relationships with their landlords that added to the desire to leave that housing situation.

Access and support

Location.—Location mattered in caregivers’ consideration of housing options. For some the location was chosen to maintain routines, such as being near childcare, schools, family,

and other services. Angela described how helpful her in-laws were in helping with childcare so that she could maintain her job: “The location, reason I stayed here, was because they live half a block. They’ve helped me out a lot with my oldest.” Tiffany also noted the benefits of living close to social supports who can help with childcare, saying, “The location, ah, was okay, because my mother-in-law lives near here...she watches the baby while I work.” Other participants more generally identified social support as a benefit of location. When Marla left her previous housing she chose to move in with family, saying, “...I’m close with my family, that’s why.” For others, location was an important factor in order to be further away from family or stressful situations. Tiffany was initially linked with child welfare services after drugs were found in her system during childbirth. She decided not to live with or near her parents when given the option because “my parents are big enablers when it come- came to my problem.” Cynthia also left the neighborhood in which she grew up and where her family continued to live due to her family members’ legal trouble, saying, “there’s a new start for me and my son.” Decisions to move away from social supports and familiar spaces were not easy, with Cynthia adding, “...if you would go outside everybody’d know everybody. So this was completely, this is completely different.”

Social support.—The importance of location often related to being close to social supports for both practical support needs (e.g., help with childcare) and emotional support. Social supports were additionally helpful in making housing decisions. For example, Barbara talked about how her sister provided a great deal of help in her housing search by knowing what questions to ask and what to look for in a home: “Well, she mainly helped me – went and looked for apartments, and she was telling me to pick the apartment that had mostly had heat included...’cause...she wanted to make sure I was able to, you know, pay my rent, pay my bills, and still provide for my children with the little income that I was getting.” Family also provided feedback regarding the area in which to live, as was the case for Carol: “My husband, um, currently going – we’re separated; we’re getting a divorce. But, uh, it mostly him, because he grew up in this neighborhood. So he said it would – it would be safe for the kids, so.”

Family members were also integral to the decision of where to live when residing with others. Marla, who moved in with her mother said, “My mom wanted me to, [of] course. You know, when I had her first grandchild. She, you know, figured that I’d be safer here and it’d be more convenient for me.” Candace and Pamela also reported family members offered a place for them to live. Candace noted her mother offered to let her live with her when she was homeless, while Pamela was invited to live with her aunt when her previous housing situation “wasn’t working anymore.” The housing choices of these participants were guided by their families’ willingness to provide a place for them to live.

Discrepancies in perceptions of housing assistance

Housing vouchers.—Caregivers referred for housing vouchers were generally grateful for DCFS housing assistance. Katherine reported gratitude to her caseworker for helping with the housing assistance, stating “I’m thankful for them getting me the service that I needed as far as the Section 8...cause if it wasn’t for her I don’t know where I would be” However, gratitude was limited by ongoing financial struggle and program limitations. As

Samantha reported, “I’m still like maintaining. It not like we got eviction notice on our door. So the voucher’s like keeping us going. If I had to pay rent right now, I don’t know what I’d be doing.” Vouchers make a big difference, many are still living on a budget and only able to save modestly.

The restrictions inherent in using housing vouchers often contributed to feeling a lack of choice in housing. Many participants reported feeling rushed to find housing in order to use their housing voucher. When asked why she chose her apartment, Selina said, “I went on and just took it, so yeah, ‘cause I wouldn’t have had enough time to look for something else when I had only one month left...If you ain’t find nothing within that time, then the voucher would have just went to waste...So I just went on and took this.” Tiffany reported a similar experience when seeking housing with her voucher, stating, “I almost ran out. They only give you 90 days to find a place when you get a voucher issued to you. And we had like two weeks left,” and Barbara noted, “To be honest with you, the reason why I moved was because my Section 8 time was running out” after the interviewer queried for various factors related to her housing choices.

Caregivers noted delays in the ability to move into housing in a timely manner. For some, delays were related to failed inspections, such as with Samantha, who reported that both her current and past apartment failed the inspections three times each. Another participant, Cynthia, described having to bounce between housing situations while waiting for the inspections to pass:

I was living, during the process of waiting for the, uh, approval, um, I had to sleep on the floor with my son at my sister’s house ‘cause she has a one bedroom with her baby. Uh, we had to stay in a hotel room, with my dad. Um, we had to go stay with my aunt all the way in [central Illinois]...So moving around was like, the worst thing. The wait was the worst thing.

While many families who received housing vouchers were pleased with the services and assistance, clearly the process created challenges. Others reported feeling disappointed by lack of choices. In fact, Carol chose not to use the housing voucher due to safety concerns:

I would get excited about a place until I would go look for it and then realize, you know, it’s like gang-related area, you know. And you could just tell if it’s a bad area right away. So I could not find a place in this area...when you go for the meeting they have this huge map and it shows you the good areas. Well, I don’t think you can use Section 8 in that kind of area.

Carol expressed despondence when reflecting on her decision to give up the voucher. While there were many reasons she did not use the voucher, the effort to get an extension was a final straw:, “

I just couldn’t do it; I kept looking and looking and then my time ran out. And, you know...they even said I need to go down there and they told me what to do to keep my Section 8, not to lose it, but I didn’t do it...

Supportive services.—Considerable variability existed in how caregivers described non-subsidy housing services. Some reported a great deal of help from caseworkers and housing advocates. Cynthia described the help she received, “they knew that I was kind of on drugs and...I had to move out of that apartment as soon as possible. So – and they were very helpful by sending me to plenty of places.” A number of caregivers positively recalled concerns regarding safety by caseworkers and advocates. Angela reported help in looking for an apartment:

my advocate took the time to come all the way over here, even though she worked at town, to look at apartments, like she knew what she was looking for. She would – I would just look at her when every time she would ask questions, the janitor, whoever. She would ask safety questions, um, lead questions, how old was the apartment, stuff like that. She would look for small things that could harm the kids.

Many participants reported failing to receive what would have been appropriate help from caseworkers and housing advocates. Some noted that they felt their caseworkers were encouraging them to live in unsafe neighborhoods. In describing the apartments her caseworker took her to see, Danielle said, “One of them I knew for a fact that the block was bad, and there was a lot of shootin’ and killin’ over there. I know for a fact. He tried to tell me different, but I knew.” Monique, who felt similarly regarding the areas in which the caseworker was suggesting housing expressed additional frustration, saying,

I was in the situation where I was living in the shelter and, y’know, before that I was living in my car that I would be willing to take anything and I don’t feel like... I don’t wanna say that I’m, I’m snooty, but I have...I don’t know what you call ‘em. Morals.

Some caregivers were displeased and seemed offended that the caseworker would think she would be willing to live in such settings, simply given her previous circumstances.

Discussion

This study embedded a qualitative follow-up within a randomized controlled trial to understand how child welfare-involved families make housing decisions after referral for housing services. Caregivers generally report limitations to their housing choices, largely related to issues of availability and affordability, with little room to make housing choices based on other factors. Few differences exist between caregivers referred for subsidized housing vouchers and caregivers receiving case management alone on their housing decision-making process.

The present study emphasizes the push-pull dynamics involved in housing choices of low-income families (Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012), and are presented in Figure 1. Push factors refer to elements of housing from which families aim to avoid or leave, while pull factors are those elements of the sought-after housing that are desirable and likely to entice one towards making certain housing decisions. Push factors are prominent in housing choices among inadequately housed child welfare-involved families; many caregivers note they had to leave prior housing due to various issues, such as poor housing quality. They also are “pushed” by

time constraints of leaving other housing through evictions or time limits in using housing vouchers.

Pull factors appear somewhat less important in the short-term, as families' options and time were limited such that prioritizing typical pull factors was simply not an option. The impetus to move is typically related to escaping a bad housing situation such as an unresponsive landlord, unlivable housing conditions, inability to afford housing any longer, or time limits requiring them to leave and find the first available and affordable living space. Rarely did participants describe desirable qualities that had pulled them towards their current housing. When they did, caregivers within child welfare services in need of housing assistance report similar priorities in their housing choices as other low-income families, including having enough space (Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012), living in a convenient location (Fisher et al., 2014; Pashup et al., 2005), and being near social support (Boyd et al., 2011; Fisher et al., 2014; Pashup et al., 2005; Varady & Walker, 2000).

Pull factors typically relate to a reactive process arising from push factors, such as the push of time leading to a pull towards housing that is available or that would accept a housing voucher. Housing choices are largely constrained as caregivers struggle to navigate limited availability of affordable housing and necessary supports, typically without much time. The choices families make essentially focus on securing affordable housing that has enough space to accommodate themselves and their children. Hence, safety is often not a key feature in caregivers' housing decision-making process, as other constraints and considerations tend to play a larger role in their decisions. However, the desire for a more adequate and supportive housing condition then continues to pull them towards searching for better housing, thus leading to further moves and greater housing instability in the long run. While the push factors appear to have greater influence on caregivers' housing decisions in the short-term, pull factors play a key role in maintaining caregivers' housing instability in the long-term. In essence, caregivers' decision to seek better housing opportunities are impacted by the interacting forces of the push-pull dynamics.

Arising from the dynamics of push and pull factors, and caregivers' overall experiences in making housing decisions, is a meta-theme of a lack of power and control over their housing choices. Even when families receive supportive housing services through housing vouchers and/or case management by their DCFS workers and assistance from housing advocates, they continue to express difficulties in navigating housing options due to the combined constraints placed on them from the housing and child welfare systems. This suggests that as long as the child welfare system remains insensitive to the unique challenges faced by inadequately housed families and those experiencing homelessness, or if housing support services are not sufficiently tailored to meet the particular needs of child welfare-involved families, these families would be stuck in a catch-22, where they struggle to make appropriate housing decisions within their limited capacity.

Implications

Findings from this study suggest inadequately housed families with child welfare involvement face similar challenges when making housing decisions as others who are in need of housing assistance, while simultaneously experiencing additional stressors, and

greater urgency when making these decisions. For example, some caregivers are put in the position of needing to find new housing due to caseworkers deeming their housing inadequate for their children. In this way families' housing predicament becomes an additional stressor they must manage or risk separation from their children. Furthermore, others note that to receive assistance, they were required to expend a certain amount of effort such as spending time searching for housing on their own accord, before they could access housing support.

To alleviate this additional burden on families who have oftentimes maximized their existing resources and coping capacity, it is critical for housing support services currently provided by caseworkers and housing advocates as well as the constraints placed on the use of housing vouchers to be re-evaluated and enhanced by ensuring the timeliness and appropriateness of the support services. In addition to enhancing direct aid offered to families navigating the housing and child welfare systems simultaneously, it is imperative to advocate for policies targeting unaffordable housing markets, and the related issues with landlords, as a means of creating more sustainable systemic changes.

Foremost, time constraints placed on the use of housing vouchers and the consequent urgency this creates for families in search of adequate housing need to be re-considered in the context of the multiple challenges that child welfare-involved families are dealing with. In conjunction, there is a need to re-evaluate the time allotted to caseworkers to aid families in their search for housing as well. Some caregivers report that caseworkers and housing advocates are helpful in assisting them to find housing and capitalize the use of housing services. In this way, families involved with child welfare services benefit from the aid of others in order to secure and use their housing assistance. Therefore, it may be useful for child welfare services to ensure that families are receiving this help more uniformly through performance evaluations or by ensuring housing advocates are working with all identified families. To do so, these services likely require additional support of their own such as through decreasing caseload size and increasing the number of caseworkers and advocates in efforts to avoid potential burnout as well as to ensure that services are provided to families in a timely manner.

Caregiver reports also make it clear that services provided may be marked by biases of caseworkers and advocates, indicating that there would be benefits of additional training. Specifically, service providers would benefit from greater focus on the particular needs and stated values of those they are serving. Not only would this improve satisfaction with assistance provided, but families are more likely to have greater satisfaction with their housing, ultimately decreasing residential mobility and instability. Furthermore, the assistance provided by housing advocates is typically considered inadequate or unhelpful, as participants described receiving apartment listings for housing beyond their price ranges, and with no options for financial assistance. In lieu of housing assistance, other services may similarly benefit caregivers, including help finding employment or seeking other forms of aid that would improve their ability to seek appropriate housing. Overall, ensuring timely receipt of support services from both caseworkers and advocates who are adequately trained in understanding the unique challenges and needs of these families is crucial to interrupting

the cycle of inadequate housing and preventing families from becoming entrenched in the child welfare system.

Enhancing direct service to families should ideally be accompanied by changes at the broader systemic level. Affordability is not the only factor determining where families live. Many participants note they are unable to find housing in better neighborhoods, in part because they were refused or lost contact with a landlord after expressing plans to use a housing voucher. In fact, as described in the results, participants at times find that the only housing they can find that would accept their housing vouchers is in neighborhoods that appear more impoverished and crime-ridden than their current housing. Through this cycle, it appears families are stuck with few options. To address these issues, it is imperative that landlords be better held accountable, and that families seeking housing are appropriately educated about these policies to better advocate for themselves. Further, additional policy changes to the housing markets aimed at desegregating neighborhoods by socioeconomic status are recommended.

Limitations

The study provides a snapshot of a relatively small group of inadequately housed families involved in the child welfare system. Budget limitations constrained number of interviews and precluded follow-up with caregivers. It is unclear whether identified themes represent true saturation that stabilize over time. Moreover, only caregivers were assessed in the present study, which limits findings to a single perspective, while children and other family members could perceive decision making differently. Future evaluation with a larger group followed over time would provide more specific recommendations for policy and practice.

Conclusion

Improving the housing experiences of inadequately housed families involved with the child welfare system is rife with complexities. The difficulty in obtaining housing creates a barrier for some families, and uptake of assistance varies based on the unique family situation. Caregivers report many factors influencing their decisions, including cost, space, availability, location, and social support. This difficulty is true not only for those who were not referred for housing vouchers; for those who do get a referral, both systemic and political barriers further impede their choices. Truly improving housing experiences for these families will require meeting other needs, and may even require changes in policy to best afford opportunities and increase the range of choices for those using such assistance.

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Figure 1.

Push-pull dynamics involved in housing decisions among inadequately housed and child welfare-involved caregivers. Push factors propel towards new accommodations, while pull factors encourage families into unsustainable situations. Decisions generate a perpetual loop of housing instability

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Full ($n = 150$), Qualitative ($n = 19$), and Non-Qualitative ($n = 131$) Samples with Comparison

Variable	Full <i>M (SD) or %</i>	Qualitative <i>M (SD) or %</i>	Non-Qualitative <i>M (SD) or %</i>	<i>t or χ^2</i>	<i>p</i>
Caregiver Age	31.4 (8.1)	33.3 (8.3)	31.1 (8.0)	-1.13	0.26
Caregiver Race (%)				6.19	0.05
African American	66.7	68.4	66.4		
Latino/a	20.7	5.3	22.9		
White	12.0	26.3	9.9		
Caregiver Gender (%)				1.55	0.21
Female	93.3	100.0	92.4		
Condition (%)				0.54	0.46
Treatment	50.0	57.9	48.9		
Education Level (%)				1.75	0.63
Less Than High School	36.0	26.3	37.4		
High School Degree	28.7	26.3	29.0		
Some College	32.7	42.1	31.3		
Associates' Degree	2.7	5.3	2.3		
History of Separations (%)				1.08	0.30
1 or more	19.3	10.5	20.6		

Notes. Chi-square analyses compared categorical outcomes, while t-tests were used for continuous variables. Inclusion dummy coded as *qualitative* = 1 and remaining *non-qualitative sample* = 0.

Table 2.

Summary of Themes Regarding Housing Decisions

Category	Key themes	Description
Timing and Availability	Last minute decisions	Participants described their housing as “last minute” due to an urgent need to leave previous housing, or time constraints to use assistance.
	Lack of options	Quick decisions often limited participant’s ability to make choices about housing. Those who did not receive housing assistance or have the means to live on their own stated living with family members was their only option.
Unaffordable Housing Market	Cost	With or without housing assistance, cost was important for all participants. While primarily important in regards to affordability, many also referenced the importance of finding housing that would allow them to have some money to save or spend on their children, if possible.
	Space	Finding enough space was difficult for many participants, with some trading off less space for a more affordable apartment. However, space was consistently noted as important for the children in the household, as well as to afford privacy and independence for participants.
Access and Support	Poor housing quality	Participants reported this as a reason to leave apartments, often due to poor maintenance on the of landlords and property managers. Many also reported poor housing quality in the houses to which they moved.
	Location	Participants had many reasons part to prioritize location, including access to services and transportation and remaining close to family and friends, who sometimes provided additional support to families (e.g., daycare).
	Social Support	Family and friends often helped participants make housing decisions, at times offering that they could stay in their homes when needed.
Discrepancies in Perceived Housing Assistance	Housing Vouchers	Participants receiving housing subsidies note that it is necessary to afford their housing; however, difficulties in finding housing with a voucher in a timely manner were noted and diminished enthusiasm for the program.
	Supportive Services	Caseworkers and housing advocates were described variably. Some reported positive experiences, receiving appropriate support and guidance, while others described difficulty keeping in contact with them. Still others described negative experiences, noting they did not receive the expected services or felt unsupported.