

U.S. Commentary: Effects of Housing Subsidies on the Well-Being of Children and Their Families in the Family Options Study

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Introduction

Homelessness and housing instability are bad for children and families—a fact that is obvious to any reasonable individual but is also well documented by social science research. Children who are homeless or who move often have poorer school achievement and more behavioral problems than comparably poor children who live in more stable housing situations (Buckner, 2008; Mehana and Reynolds, 2004). Public policy solutions for these problems are less obvious, but the Family Options Study provides some clear guidance about what does and does not work. In the Family Options Study (Gubits et al., 2016), the effects of four types of policy interventions on homeless families with children were compared in a random assignment design. Families were followed for 3 years after the interventions were introduced.

The big message from this study is that permanent, reliable, and consistent housing subsidies promote housing stability for homeless families and their children's well-being. Short-term housing programs, whether they are rapid re-housing or project-based housing with social services, have nearly no long-term effects on housing stability or on the many measures of families' physical, social, and economic well-being included in the study when compared with the usual practices of shelters for the homeless.

Subsidies Reduced Chaos in Families' Lives

One of the many reasons that homelessness is so harmful is the chaos it creates in every aspect of family life. Chaos includes instability or turbulence (frequent changes in the people and places that surround the child) and the disorganization that often results from crowded and noisy housing, clutter, and lack of family routines for school, work, sleep, and meals. Children and adults living in chaotic circumstances cannot predict or control their environments. They literally do not know what to expect or when to expect it. A child might come home from school to find the family possessions on the street. Parents in chaotic environments suffer from the stress of trying to cope with

unpredictable circumstances, which reduces the time and energy available to be supportive and nurturing to their children. Although poor families experience more chaos than affluent families do, the effects of chaos on children go beyond the overall impacts of poverty. Poverty leads to limited resources, but chaos results in lack of access to the resources that are available (Wachs and Evans, 2010).

In the Family Options Study, permanent housing subsidies (hereafter, SUB) reduced some of the chaos in the families' environments. SUB reduced instability in children's lives—it increased not only the continuity of housing, but also the stability of childcare and school and some indicators of family stability. Families receiving long-term subsidies spent less time being homeless and had fewer moves during the 3-year followup period. The SUB policy reduced the number of childcare settings and the number of schools that children attended but did not affect the likelihood that children would be in Head Start¹ or center-based preschools. By contrast, the other two policies tested may have increased instability because families were often required to move after short-term interventions. Finally, SUB reduced the likelihood that children would be separated from their parents (for example, placed in foster care) in the first 20 months of the study. The one exception was that SUB parents were more likely to have separated from their spouse or partner at the 3-year followup. Given the fact that SUB reduced experiences of domestic violence at both time periods, it is quite possible that having their own housing enabled some women to separate from abusive men, an outcome that could represent an improvement for children.

SUB reduced disorganization. In that group, housing was less crowded than housing used by members of the other groups. They were more likely to live in their own home or apartment and less likely to be doubled up than were other groups in the study.

Long-Term Subsidies Improved Children's Physical and Social Environments

Many of the effects of homelessness and poverty on children are a result of parents' levels of stress and their efforts to cope with difficult circumstances (McLoyd, 1998). In the SUB group, parents were less psychologically stressed, less economically stressed, and, after 20 months, less likely to use or abuse alcohol or drugs. Parents were less likely to experience violence from an intimate partner. This change is especially noteworthy because, at baseline, one-half of the parents reported having experienced intimate partner violence. As a result of these changes, family conflict may have been less frequent, and parents were probably more likely to offer positive care and support to their children.

Homelessness and poverty also affect children through unsafe and dangerous physical environments (Evans, 2006). Children in low-income families are at risk for exposure to lead, air pollution, and other toxins. In an earlier study of housing vouchers for families on welfare, subsidies enabled families to live in housing with better physical quality and in better neighborhoods (Abt

¹ Head Start is the free federally funded program to provide high-quality early education for preschool children from low-income families. Center-based childcare is more likely to improve young children's school-related skills than are other forms of early childcare.

Associates, 2006). Unfortunately, the Family Options Study does not include neighborhood quality, but at the 20-month followup, SUB families were less likely than the other groups to live in poor-quality housing; no difference was found after 3 years.

Long-Term Subsidies Improved Children's Well-Being

Given the beneficial environmental changes produced by the SUB policy, it was surprising that virtually no effects were found on any aspect of child development or child functioning at the 20-month followup. The picture was different at 36 months. Children in SUB families were better off in several respects, although not on all the indicators measured. Changes in cognitive skills and behavior take time.

Behavior and emotional well-being improved. SUB led to significant improvements in children's behavior. Children in the SUB group had fewer behavior problems, more prosocial behavior, and fewer sleep problems than those children in the control condition. This change is consistent with the idea that introducing stability and some level of organization into young lives reduces anxiety, aggression, and negative behavior, and the increase in prosocial behavior (for example, being helpful, considerate, and kind) is particularly noteworthy. Too often, we look only for deficiencies in behavior when studying children in poverty, but increases in positive behavior reflect improved well-being and better ability to succeed in many social settings.

Achievement did not change. SUB parents reported more positive attitudes to their children's preschool and school experiences, and children were less likely to move from school to school, but no effects were found on cognitive skills of young children or school achievement for those of elementary and high-school age. In fact, the young children in SUB families scored lower than those in the control families on a test of executive functioning. Why? Although national data show clearly that homeless children perform less well in school than comparable housed children, even those who are poor, that does not mean that an intervention to prevent homelessness will alter the achievement trajectories that began early in life.

The wide age range (1 to 17 years old) in the sample analyzed may have obscured impacts on children of different ages. Interventions to counteract the conditions of poverty have more positive effects on younger than on older children, and housing experiences probably have different effects on younger children than on adolescents. In the Moving to Opportunity experiment, for example, moves to neighborhoods with relatively low poverty levels before age 13 had positive effects on adult attainment, but moves during adolescence had slightly negative effects (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz, 2016). The same pattern appears consistently in random control trials testing various employment-based welfare and anti-poverty policies—positive effects on achievement for younger children but neutral or slightly negative effects on adolescents (Morris et al., 2009). For example, the New Hope intervention, which provided wage supplements, healthcare, and childcare supports to parents who worked full time, led to lasting positive effects, including better school performance, more positive behavior and less problem behavior for younger children (roughly ages 1 to 10 years old when the intervention began), but not for those who were already adolescents when their parents entered the program (Huston et al., 2011). At a more distal level, family income during the preschool years predicts adult attainment better than family income after age 6 (Huston and Bentley, 2010).

It is not surprising, then, that virtually no impacts were discovered on adolescents' self-reports. By the time children reach early adolescence, their school trajectories are well established. If they have not gained basic skills or kept up with their grade level, it is very difficult to catch up. Behavioral patterns are somewhat more malleable, but are nevertheless well established by early adolescence.

At the other end of the age continuum, theory and research on the first few years of life suggest that very young children may be especially vulnerable to chaos and disorganization in their environments. Recall that more than one-half of families had a child under age 3 and nearly 10 percent of the women were pregnant when they were recruited at homeless shelters. Both social and cognitive development in the early years are strongly affected by the inconsistency of people and places experienced in homeless families. For all these reasons, examining the Family Options Study data for children in different age ranges would yield a better understanding of the impacts on young people.

Children were healthy and food sufficiency improved. It is encouraging that the great majority of children in all groups had access to regular healthcare and were in good or excellent health. When recruited in the homeless shelters, most children were receiving Medicaid, and about one-third of the families received Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, benefits. Most families in all treatments were receiving Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits 3 years after random assignment, yet one-half of control families still reported food insecurity. SUB families were less likely to be food insecure; their children were more apt to get enough to eat.

Understanding Homelessness in the Context of Deep Poverty

Stepping back from the specifics of the data, this study provokes some thoughts about families living in extreme poverty in the United States and extant theories underlying public policies designed to help them. Homelessness is the extreme end on a continuum of poverty. Most of the families had long histories of being poor and struggling with housing. Many had doubled up or became homeless before reaching the shelter where they were recruited for the study; some of them were homeless, in fostercare, or both as children. They had spotty histories of paid work, and the median family income was well below one-half of the poverty threshold for a family of three in 2011. These families were in deep, chronic poverty.

“Self-sufficiency” is a long road for poor families. Many policymakers and policy analysts promote the goal of self-sufficiency when designing programs for low-income people. They seem to believe that a set of incentives and sanctions will lead adults to find jobs that can fully support themselves and their families within a relatively short time period. The underlying theory appears to be that, with a little temporary help, parents in these families have the personal and community resources to earn a reasonable living. That idea guided the community-based rapid re-housing and, to some extent, project-based transitional housing components of the Family Options Study, but none of the programs (or the control “usual” treatment) led to jobs or incomes that were remotely sufficient to get families out of poverty or to eliminate their need for housing subsidies, food assistance, and other public programs.

Theories assuming that extremely poor families can be self-sufficient with only a short-term boost in housing subsidies or some short-term services in a supervised setting turned out to be wrong. The families continued to need supplements to the cost of housing; 60 percent of the people in the SUB group used the subsidies for the full 3 years. This result is not surprising considering the depth and duration of poverty in which they had lived.

Many of the parents faced numerous barriers to gaining and keeping employment. A minority had felony convictions or a history of rental problems, and they all had family responsibilities. Close to 40 percent had a disability or a family member with a disability. About one-half had very young children, and nearly 10 percent were pregnant when they were recruited into the study. Most were single mothers, and a disproportionate number were African-American or Latina. One-half of the parents had experienced domestic violence, and a substantial number reported serious mental health problems. It is unclear what work supports were available to them. Only about one-fourth were receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, and no information was provided about childcare assistance or availability. However, most preschool children were not enrolled in Head Start or childcare centers at the followup. Similarly, more than one-third lacked a high school degree or its equivalent, and it is likely that most parents had minimal job-related skills. In short, the odds of most parents becoming self-sufficient financially in the short term were low.

Implications for Public Policy

The big message emerging from the Family Options Study is that long-term permanent housing subsidies help to stabilize families and to improve the lives and future prospects of their children. Children in homeless families face risks above and beyond those posed by poverty. A policy that enables families to have stable housing helps to reduce chaos and churning—the constant turnover of places and people in children’s lives. As a consequence, children’s behavior is less troubled and more positive, and parents are less stressed. Child well-being should be an important policy goal in its own right, but it is also reasonable to believe that these improvements in behavior and family well-being will have economic benefits.

Some policymakers may be concerned that the parents receiving long-term supplements worked fewer hours and were less likely to be in educational programs than the control group, but the earnings and family incomes of the two groups did not differ significantly. I would argue that the benefits of the policy for family well-being outweigh the drawbacks of very slight differences in work, making the investment in the program worthwhile.

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