

Fowler, P. J., Brown, D. S., Schoeny, M., & Chung, S. (2018). Homelessness in the child welfare system: A randomized controlled trial to assess the impact of housing subsidies on foster care placements and costs. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 83, 52–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.07.014>

What we know

Studies have shown a link between family homelessness and child abuse. According to national estimates, 1 in 6 of approximately three million children who are screened for abuse and neglect often experience inadequate housing and are thus at risk of foster placement. While homelessness is a condition that already delays family reunification with children in foster care, child welfare agencies struggle to meet the need for safe shelters. The Family Unification Program (FUP) was created as a federal initiative funded by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to connect child welfare involved families with housing vouchers. These subsidies in the form of monthly financial allowances were given to ensure that no more than 30% of household income goes toward rent.

What this study adds

Previous studies are limited by the lack of a true comparison group and little information on cost savings associated with FUP. This study is the first and only randomized controlled trial to examine the effects of FUP on keeping families together. In this study, families receiving subsidies experienced slower foster care placement over time compared to families only receiving case management. In addition, cost savings of approximately \$500 per year were estimated for each family receiving subsidies. This is primarily due to the reduction of more intensive and expensive placements with non-relatives.

What this means for practice or policy

Subsidies reduced the risk of homelessness among families experiencing housing crises, and prevention of homelessness helped stabilize families and keep children at home. In addition, FUP increased housing stability, which indirectly supports the safety and well-being of children. Although the effect sizes of the FUP were smaller than expected, the fact that this intervention can keep families together should improve child behavior and development. There is a need for strategies that enhance housing interventions. The results of this study should prompt policymakers to ask: is timely housing financial support that prevent family separation a better alternative to more invasive and expensive family preservation services?

How do we know this is a good study

The study involved families whose inadequate housing conditions threatened foster placement of their children, leading them to be investigated by child welfare in Chicago, IL. Each family was assigned to either FUP plus housing advocacy (n=89 families with 257 children) or housing advocacy alone (n=89 families with 257 children) from 2011 to 2013 with a 3-year follow-up. Generalized linear mixed modeling and two-part multivariable regressions were used to analyze the data.