

The Role of Supportive Housing in Homeless Children's Well-Being: An Investigation of Child Welfare Outcomes

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the effect of family supportive housing services on the safety of homeless children over time.¹

METHODS

Using Minn-Link data, three-year longitudinal data sets (2007-2009) were developed and comparison cohorts were created using homeless/highly mobile codes in educational records. A longitudinal analysis of four cohort groups (Grade 3, Grade 4, Grade 5, and Grade 6) was conducted. Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) analysis was used to determine whether the supportive housing service group and its matched comparison group's educational outcomes were changing at different rates over the investigation period. (See Table 1 for descriptive cohort information.)

HOMELESS CHILDREN

Children who experience homelessness also experience a myriad of negative encounters with educational and child welfare systems. Research indicates that homeless children are more exposed to violence and social isolation due to their often dangerous living environments, past histories of victimization, and trauma experienced by their mothers. All these factors increase homeless families' probability of involvement with the child welfare system (Anooshian, 2005).

The little research that examines homeless families' contact with child welfare indicates that homeless families have higher rates of child welfare involvement than non-homeless families in receipt of child protection services (Culhane et al., 2003; Park et al., 2004), substantiations of maltreatment (Larson & Meehan, 2011), and out-of-home placements (Larson & Meehan, 2011; Zima et al., 1994; Masten, 1993; Wilder Research, 2010).

Fortunately, a myriad of services is available to assist families struggling with homelessness. Available services follow a continuum of care ranging from emergency shelters to transitional housing to permanent supportive housing. Supportive housing programs focus on homeless families with significant barriers (e.g., health, disabilities, history of abuse, and violence) to housing stability and long histories of homelessness. Supportive housing programs provide families with social services, such as job and life skills training, access to alcohol and drug abuse programs, and case management in conjunction with permanent housing.

Thirty-four percent of Minnesota's homeless population is comprised of children in families (Wilder Research, 2010) yet little is known about children's experiences of homelessness as it relates to child well-being over time. The current understanding of homeless children's encounters with child welfare is driven by studies that explore the experience or "state" of homelessness rather than change in experience longitudinally. Even less is known about how children fair while receiving supportive housing services as most research focuses on adult (e.g., employment) or family-level (e.g., housing stability) outcomes.

Table 1. Descriptive information

	Sup. Housing		Comparison	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Cohort 1 [Grade 3]	19	27.1	89	26
Cohort 2 [Grade 4]	20	28.6	83	24.3
Cohort 3 [Grade 5]	18	25.7	95	27.8
Cohort 4 [Grade 6]	13	18.6	75	21.9
Total	70	100	342	100

To investigate associations between receipt of supportive housing services and child safety, the proportion of children involved in a child protection (CP) report, the total number of CP reports, and the proportion of children in out-of-home placement were compared for the Supportive Housing and comparison groups over time. Descriptive statistics were primarily used to describe differences between two groups due to small sample size.

¹The report, from which this brief is taken, investigated children's education well-being and involvement in child protection/child safety.

DISCUSSION POINTS

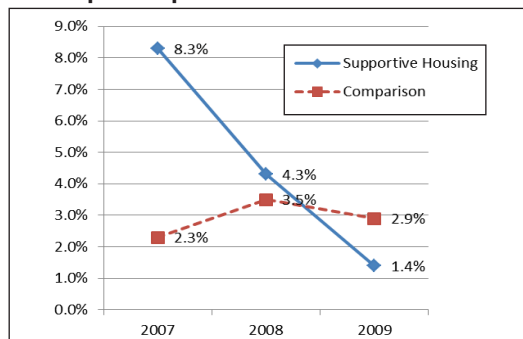
- Supportive Housing appears to be positively associated with children's safety as the child protection involvement for children receiving supportive housing services decreased over time whereas the same was not true of children in the comparison group.
- Out-of-home placements decreased by approximately 50% over time for the Supportive Housing group, while they increased by approximately 50% for the comparison group.
- While these findings are promising, future research is needed to better understand the effect of supportive housing services on homeless children's safety. In the meantime, it seems warranted to maintain funding of supportive housing programs to continue to meet the needs of homeless children. Policy-makers and service providers may wish to consider new approaches or partnerships for supporting homeless children's needs.

FINDINGS

Involvement in a Maltreatment Report.

Between 2007 and 2009, a total of seven children (10%) from the Supportive Housing group and 27 children (8%) from the comparison group were involved in at least one accepted report of child maltreatment. However, while the proportion of children involved in an accepted report decreased for the supportive housing group over time, it remained steady for the comparison group (Figure 1).

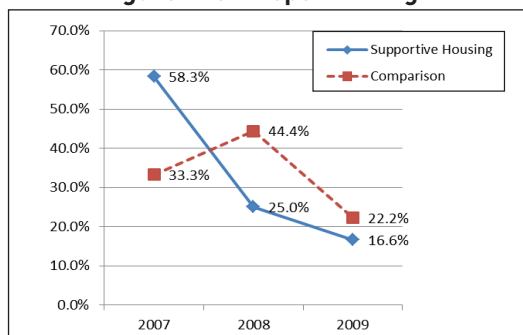
Figure 1. Proportion of children involved in accepted reports of child maltreatment*



*Reflects involvement in accepted reports each year; children may be involved in multiple years.

Timing of CP Reports. For the supportive housing group, most child protection reports occurred prior to supportive housing service receipt. However, involvement varied over time for children in the comparison group (Figure 2).

Figure 2. CP Report timing**



** % is calculated by dividing the number of CP reports in a given year by the total number of CP reports during 2007-09

Out-of-Home Placement. The number of children in out-of-home placement in the supportive housing group decreased over time from two (2.9%) in 2007 to one (1.4%) in 2009 while the comparison group increased over time from four (1.2%) in 2007 to eight (2.3%) in 2009.

LIMITATIONS

Small sample sizes in each cohort group limit the application of statistical testing. Additionally, the history of homeless children in the comparison group was only available in 2008 and 2009. It is unknown whether these children were homeless in 2007. It is also unknown what services, if any, children in the comparison group received.

REFERENCES

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For the original full report and complete list of references, visit the CASCW web site at <http://cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/research> and follow the link to Minn-LInK.

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a resource for child welfare professionals, students, faculty, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders concerned about child welfare in Minnesota. Minn-LInK is a unique collaborative, university-based research environment with the express purpose of studying child and family well being in Minnesota using state administrative data from multiple agencies.

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