

Guest Editors' Introduction

Next Steps for the Family Options Study

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Introduction

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers the largest federal program dedicated to addressing homelessness, the Continuum of Care (CoC) program. Through the CoC program, HUD awards approximately \$2 billion annually to local communities with the aim of quickly rehousing homeless individuals and families.¹

Given concerns about how homelessness may influence the life experiences of children, policy-makers have given particular attention to the needs of families who experience homelessness. Despite increasing appropriations dedicated to homeless assistance during the past three decades, family homelessness has stubbornly persisted.

Family homelessness is dynamic, with families moving in and out of homeless assistance programs every day. Throughout the year in 2015, nearly 155,000 families with children, representing more than 500,000 adults and children, accessed the homeless assistance system (Solari et al., 2016). Over the years, divergent theories about the cause(s) of family homelessness have led to the rise of different types of interventions designed to address the problem. One theory holds that, whatever other challenges a family may face, homelessness is purely an economic problem—housing costs surpass the incomes of poor families—and housing assistance alone can resolve it. Another theory posits that, whereas housing assistance is indeed crucial, family homelessness is the result of other

¹ FY 2018 HUD congressional budget justifications, <https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=22-HomelessAGrants.pdf>.

challenges (such as child welfare engagement, mental health or substance abuse challenges, or unemployment), which must be addressed in order to end families' homelessness. In addition to these two broad theories on the causes of homelessness, evidence that at least some families experiencing homelessness will eventually secure housing without assistance has led to two schools of thought on appropriate policy, with some arguing that the need for access to assistance is permanent, and others arguing that it need be only temporary. Debate on the appropriateness of various housing and services interventions to assist homeless families is also influenced by the policy tradeoffs necessitated by the range of costs of alternative interventions.

The Family Options Study, launched by HUD in 2008, is a multisite randomized controlled trial, which was designed to measure the relative impacts of various housing and services interventions for homeless families.² The study was designed as a randomized experiment to generate the most rigorous evidence suitable for informing policy. Gubits et al. (2016, 2015) provide evidence about the effects, relative to usual care, of giving families in emergency shelters priority access to different types of housing and services interventions. Because each intervention is designed to address homelessness through different pathways, outcomes of interest extended beyond housing stability to also include family preservation, child well-being, adult well-being, and self-sufficiency.

The results of the Family Options Study offer striking evidence of the power of offering a long-term rent subsidy to a homeless family in shelter, substantially increasing housing stability and yielding benefits across a number of important domains, including reductions in residential moves, child separations, adult psychological distress, experiences of intimate partner violence, food insecurity, and school mobility among children, although those benefits were accompanied by reductions in work effort. These findings provide support for the notion that family homelessness is largely an economic issue, and that, by solving the economic issue, families experience additional benefits that extend beyond housing stability. Equally notable is the fact that these significant benefits that accrued to the families offered a long-term rent subsidy were achieved at a comparable cost to other interventions tested, which offered few positive outcomes for families in any domain.

Family Options Study Overview

HUD launched the Family Options Study in 2008 to learn about which housing and services interventions work best for families with children experiencing homelessness. Recruitment took place in emergency shelters across the 12 participating study sites.³ To be eligible for the study, families had to have been in emergency shelter for at least 7 days and have at least one child under the age of 15 with them in shelter. All families meeting the criteria were invited to be part of the study. In total, the study team enrolled 2,282 families, including nearly 5,400 children,

² The Senate Report 109–109 for the fiscal year 2006 Transportation, Treasury, the Judiciary, Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill directed HUD to “undertake research to ascertain the impact of various service and housing interventions in ending homelessness for families.”

³ Alameda County, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; Boston, Massachusetts; the New Haven and Bridgeport regions of Connecticut; Denver, Colorado; Honolulu, Hawaii; Kansas City, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Phoenix, Arizona; and Salt Lake City, Utah.

into the study between September 2010 and January 2012. The study team followed the families for 3 years and measured outcomes in five domains of family well-being: (1) housing stability, (2) family preservation, (3) adult well-being, (4) child well-being, and (5) self-sufficiency.

Randomly assigning many families to different interventions is the most certain way to ensure that the results reflect the effects of priority access to a particular type of program rather than preexisting differences in the families. After providing informed consent and completing a baseline survey with each participating study family, the family was immediately randomly assigned to one of four groups—⁴

- The SUB group, in which families have priority access to a long-term rent subsidy for housing in the conventional market, typically a housing choice voucher (HCV), but no other dedicated supportive services.
- The CBRR group, in which families have priority access to a short-term rent subsidy lasting up to 18 months paired with limited housing-focused services, in the form of community-based rapid re-housing assistance.
- The PBTH group, in which families have priority access to a temporary, service-intensive stay, lasting up to 24 months, in a project-based transitional housing unit.
- The UC group, in which families have access to usual care homeless and housing assistance but do not have priority access to any particular program. In this case, *usual care* means leaving families to find their way out of shelter without priority access to a program that would provide them with a place to live.

The interventions reflect different implicit theories about the nature of family homelessness and the approaches best suited to address the problem. CBRR and SUB programs are based on the view that family homelessness is largely a consequence of housing costs that exceed the ability of some poor families to pay on an ongoing basis, a problem that housing subsidies can solve. Proponents of transitional housing emphasize that many families who become homeless have barriers in addition to poverty that make it difficult for them to secure and maintain housing. PBTH programs are based on the view that addressing these barriers and needs with an array of services in a supervised residential setting lays the best foundation for ongoing stability.

Following random assignment, families were free to take up the programs to which they were given priority access or to make other arrangements on their own, as would be the case for any family given a referral to a program in the absence of the study. Priority access provided families with immediate access to a program slot—for an HCV or other housing subsidy, or for a unit in a transitional housing facility—but families still needed to meet the eligibility criteria of the program to which they were referred, complete any required paperwork, and, in some cases, find an acceptable housing unit. Families were not prohibited from using other programs to which they were able to gain access outside the study. In this way, the study evaluates the effect of priority access to a program and thus shows the effect of a policy emphasis on a particular approach—that

⁴ All interventions were not available in all sites at all times during the enrollment period. In addition, some families were not eligible for all available interventions. A description of how this challenge was addressed methodologically is included in Wood and Fletcher (2017).

is, relatively more availability of a given type of program in a community. The design of the study provides a strong basis for drawing conclusions about the impacts of alternative policy emphases for families in emergency shelter on subsequent episodes of homelessness and housing instability, as well as several aspects of family well-being.

Gubits et al. (2015) presented short-term impacts measured 20 months after random assignment, but that period was not long enough to evaluate priority access to temporary programs that could last up to 2 years. Gubits et al. (2016) presented impacts measured approximately 3 years (37 months) after random assignment. Some impacts detected at 20 months were not detected at 37 months. Other impacts detected at 37 months were not apparent at the earlier followup point. Impacts found at either point in time hold importance when considering the relative benefits of the interventions during the 3 years of study.

Long-Term Rent Subsidy Compared With Usual Care

The study defined the primary outcome as housing stability and, in particular, the prevention of families' return to homelessness. Priority access to a long-term housing subsidy led to the best outcomes, by far, for reducing family homelessness at both 20 months and 3 years after random assignment.

The most notable effect of assignment to the SUB intervention compared with usual care was the reduction in homelessness and doubling up in the same housing unit with another family. At both the 20- and 37-month followup points, assignment to the SUB intervention reduced by more than one-half the proportion of families who reported having spent at least 1 night in shelter, in places not meant for human habitation, or doubled up in the past 6 months; increased the proportion of families living in their own place; and reduced the number of places lived in the past 6 months. The study team also measured use of emergency shelter during two 12-month periods: 7 to 18 months after random assignment and 21 to 32 months after random assignment. Relative to usual care, assignment to the SUB intervention reduced the proportion of families with a stay in shelter by nearly one-half during the earlier period and by more than three-fourths during the later period. Assignment to the SUB intervention also produced beneficial effects in other areas of family well-being and reduced food insecurity. In addition to improved housing outcomes, families assigned to the SUB intervention demonstrated significantly improved outcomes in non-housing domains, including adult well-being (reductions in psychological distress, intimate partner violence), child well-being (reductions in school mobility, behavior problems and sleep problems, and more pro-social behavior), as well as increased food security and decreased economic stress. In contrast to these beneficial effects, assignment to the SUB intervention, compared with usual care, reduced the proportion of family heads working at 20 months and reduced the proportion of those who had worked between followup surveys.

Short-Term Rent Subsidy Compared With Usual Care

Nearly no evidence exists that assignment to the CBRR intervention affected outcomes differentially compared with usual care at either followup point, across the domains of housing stability, family preservation, or adult and child well-being. Most strikingly, no evidence suggests that assignment to the CBRR intervention, relative to usual care, reduced stays in shelter or places not meant for human habitation at either followup point. Only a few effects on child well-being were apparent,

with scattered evidence of benefits from the CBRR intervention. At 20 months, relative to usual care, assignment to the CBRR intervention improved food security and family income (Gubits et al., 2015: chapter 7). Neither of these effects was evident at 37 months (Gubits et al., 2016: chapter 4).

Project-Based Transitional Housing Compared With Usual Care

Relative to usual care, assignment to the PBTH intervention reduced stays in emergency shelter during the period that some families remained in transitional housing. No evidence exists, however, of impact on other measures of housing stability or in other domains.

The Homeless Services System

In addition to documenting the impacts of interventions for families, the study sheds light on how the homeless services system works. Information on the study's implementation shows that, at the time families received priority access to CBRR and PBTH programs from 2010 to 2012, many such programs had screening criteria that could exclude families with greater challenges (Gubits et al., 2013). In addition, the use of programs by study participants shows that not all programs are equally attractive to homeless families. Families in the SUB group were more likely than families in the CBRR and PBTH groups to use the offered program type. The study also shows how families in the 12 communities access homeless and housing assistance in the absence of any priority offer. By 37 months after random assignment, 37 percent of UC families who responded to the followup survey had used some type of long-term rent subsidy (including HCVs, public housing, permanent supportive housing, and project-based Section 8 subsidies), 30 percent had used PBTH, and 20 percent had used CBRR (Gubits et al., 2016: exhibit 2-3). Over time, the use of housing subsidies increased and the use of temporary homeless assistance (emergency shelter, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing) decreased.

Costs of the Interventions

The study also analyzed the costs of emergency shelter and of the programs offered in the three active interventions, including all resources used to provide shelter or housing with supportive services, to a family during the course of 1 month. The analysis shows that emergency shelters are very expensive—even more expensive than transitional housing—on a per-month basis. Both emergency shelters and transitional housing incur substantial costs for the services they provide to families. CBRR programs have the lowest monthly cost. Although the CBRR and SUB interventions both offered rent subsidies, CBRR programs do not use the subsidy formula of HUD's HCV program and, on average, provide a somewhat smaller monthly subsidy than that provided by HCVs.

The study also measured the cost of all the programs the families used during the 3-year followup period. This measure accounts for use of the offered program type and other programs families accessed. The Family Options Study shows that homelessness is expensive for families and communities. Even without priority access to assistance, families in 12 communities used housing and services programs costing about \$41,000, on average, during a period of a little more than 3 years. Despite this considerable public (and in some cases private) investment, many families who had been in shelter for at least 1 week at the outset of the study were still not faring well 3 years later. About one-third had been homeless or doubled up recently, nearly one-half were food insecure, and incomes averaged less than two-thirds of the poverty threshold (Gubits et al., 2016: chapter 2).

Symposium Overview

The Family Options Study represents a significant milestone in research on homelessness, both in the scale and complexity of the study and in the power and clarity of the findings. The purpose of this symposium is to consider the implications of the findings to date and present a set of original articles that serve to extend the findings already documented in short-term and long-term outcomes reports.

The Family Options Study symposium presented in this issue of *Cityscape* is designed to delve deeper into the findings from the Family Options Study. The symposium begins with three commentaries from internationally renowned experts on homelessness, each of whom considers the findings from the study by comparison with homelessness and housing policy in their countries—Ireland, Australia, and Canada. Following the international commentaries, five U.S. researchers known for their expertise in child welfare, interpersonal violence, food insecurity, child development, and adult well-being provide commentaries on the significance of nonhousing impacts that were observed for families who were offered a long-term rent subsidy. Finally, the symposium includes six original articles that expand the analysis of both the short- and long-term outcomes for families and provide lessons learned from the implementation of this complex study.

International Commentaries

The symposium begins with three commentaries from international researchers who consider the methodology, findings, and policy implications from the Family Options Study through the lens of homelessness research and policy in Ireland, Australia, and Canada. Eoin O'Sullivan describes the extent of family homelessness in Ireland, noting possible reasons for the recent sharp increase of family homelessness in Dublin. He then considers the policy responses and the evidence base for these responses in light of the findings yielded by the Family Options Study (O'Sullivan, 2017). Guy Johnson and Juliet Watson follow with a commentary that assesses the extent of family homelessness in Australia, describing the main program responses that have been implemented in Australia in response to increasing family homelessness since the 1980s. Johnson and Watson (2017) conclude that, despite substantial social and economic differences between the United States and Australia, similarities in key aspects of both countries' programmatic responses to family homelessness suggests that the findings from the Family Options Study could be instructive for Australian policymakers. Finally, Geoffrey Nelson provides a comparison between the Family Options Study and a recently completed randomized controlled trial from Canada, At Home/Chez Soi, which evaluated a set of housing and service interventions for adults experiencing chronic homelessness and mental illness (Goering et al., 2014). Although the populations and interventions in the Family Options Study and At Home/Chez Soi were different, the commentary draws the parallels between the two research efforts, including their findings and policy implications (Nelson, 2017).

U.S. Commentaries

The international commentaries are followed by five commentaries written by leading U.S. experts in areas of family well-being in which the Family Options Study found significant positive impacts that extend beyond housing stability. Although the research team and HUD hypothesized that

the offer of a long-term subsidy might improve family preservation, adult well-being, and child well-being, the impacts observed extended across a broader set of outcomes than anticipated. The radiating effects of priority access to a long-term subsidy were in fact greater than hypothesized, both in the size of the impact and in the sustained impact across both points of observation. This set of commentaries encourages a second look at the child welfare, interpersonal violence, food insecurity, child development, and adult well-being findings from the study and lessons for policy.

Marah A. Curtis provides the first commentary, offering observations about the impacts on broader family well-being—including psychological distress, experience of intimate partner violence, and food insecurity—observed among families offered a long-term rent subsidy (Curtis, 2017). This piece is followed by commentaries that dig more deeply into two of these specific outcomes. First, Elaine Waxman offers an overview of the existing literature documenting the intersecting nature of housing and food insecurity and comments on the impacts on food insecurity among families who participated in the Family Options Study (Waxman, 2017). Nicole E. Allen then provides observations on the link between housing and intimate partner violence. Allen (2017) reviews the findings of the Family Options Study, offers commentary on the measurement of intimate partner violence used in the Family Options Study, and discusses opportunities for further exploration of the connections between intimate partner violence and housing policy.

The final two commentaries address issues related to child well-being that were observed in both the short- and long-term outcomes of the Family Options Study, including child welfare involvement and outcomes related to child development. Patrick J. Fowler's commentary includes an overview of the literature examining the interconnectedness of housing instability and child welfare involvement of low-income families and the resulting policy implications of the Family Options Study (Fowler, 2017). Finally, Aletha C. Huston's commentary considers the child development outcomes observed at both the short- and long-term followups (Huston, 2017).

Original Articles

The symposium features six original articles using data collected during the life of the Family Options Study. The short- and long-term outcome reports primarily focused on the impact analysis of the pairwise comparisons generated by the experiment (Gubits et al. 2016, 2015). On the other hand, this collection of articles features analyses that explore the full range of data collection supported throughout the study, including a series of qualitative interviews with a subset of study families; the extensive baseline data collection conducted with all families during enrollment into the study; and analysis of the Program Usage/Living Situation database, a unique data source constructed by the study team to track families' monthly living situation during the 3-year followup period.

The first article, by Michelle Wood and Anne Fletcher, examines lessons learned from the implementation of the Family Options Study. The study team addressed several challenges in executing the experimental design adopted for the study, including identifying interventions for study, selecting study sites, addressing ethical considerations, and implementing random assignment. The strategies applied to overcome these challenges can inform future experimental research (Wood and Fletcher, 2017).

The remaining articles included in the symposium each take a closer look at a specific research or policy question that was addressed using the data collected during the course of the Family Options Study, each having direct implications for the organization and delivery of community-based homeless assistance.

In their article, Marybeth Shinn, Scott R. Brown, Brooke E. Spellman, Michelle Wood, Daniel Gubits, and Jill Khadduri use data gathered during the enrollment phase of the Family Options Study to document the misalignment that often exists between the characteristics and needs of the families that enter shelter and the programs that have been established in communities that are purportedly designed to serve them. Families who enter shelter are frequently found ineligible for assistance that is offered, and Shinn et al. (2017) find that programs often systematically screen out families with housing and employment barriers, despite the presumption that these are the families who most need interventions to achieve housing and economic stability.

The next three articles in the symposium address the housing status of families following random assignment, including analyses of subsequent returns to housing instability or doubled-up living situations following a stay in emergency shelter. Zachary Glendening and Marybeth Shinn consider the subset of study families included in the pairwise comparison between families assigned to usual care and families offered a long-term rent subsidy. Glendening and Shinn (2017) developed risk models measuring returns to housing instability among this subset of study families, considering a set of family characteristics recorded at study enrollment and the extent to which these characteristics might predict a return to homelessness roughly 20 months after enrollment. Hannah Bush and Marybeth Shinn explore a specific type of housing instability—doubling up—in their article. *Doubling up* refers to one or more individuals in addition to the head of household residing in the same housing unit. Although this living arrangement is increasingly common, because doubling up can be either protective or detrimental to families depending on the circumstances, it is difficult to understand the overall implications of this trend. Bush and Shinn (2017) analyze the content of qualitative interviews with 35 study families, noting the advantages and disadvantages of doubling up as experienced by the head of household.

Daniel Gubits, Tom McCall, and Michelle Wood present analyses of the living situations of study families during the 3-year followup period, making use of the Program Usage/Living Situation database constructed by the research team during the study. The Program Usage/Living Situation database was developed by combining living situation data collected directly from families at five different points during the course of the study (enrollment; 6-, 12-, and 27-month tracking surveys; and the 20- and 37-month followup surveys) with administrative records that capture receipt of homeless assistance or housing assistance. Gubits, McCall, and Wood (2017), analyze the resulting month-by-month data about the kinds of situations in which families were living each month after random assignment to examine patterns related to families living in their own place and families doubling up with a relative or friend.

The final article, by Claudia D. Solari and Jill Khadduri, takes a closer look at the long-term rent subsidy intervention, with a focus on families who received priority access to HCVs and leased up using the subsidy and on families who did not receive priority access but nevertheless were able to access a long-term rent subsidy. Solari and Khadduri (2017) consider the outcomes of families who

accessed a long-term rent subsidy regardless of their random assignment, using cross-tabulations and multivariate analysis to show correlations between family and site characteristics and voucher use.

Conclusion

The Family Options Study was an ambitious research effort undertaken to better understand a critical national policy question: What is the most effective way to resolve family homelessness? The execution of the experiment resulted in a considerable volume of original data, valuable lessons learned that can inform the design and implementation of future social science experiments, and significant advancements in our understanding of the effectiveness of various housing and service interventions in addressing family homelessness.

The study findings suggest that families who experience homelessness can successfully use and retain housing vouchers, and that by doing so families experience significant benefits in a number of important domains. Importantly, the study also demonstrates a compelling set of positive outcomes that directly benefit the children in families offered a long-term rent subsidy, including reductions in child separations (observed at 20 months); psychological distress of the family head (observed at both time points); economic stress (observed at both time points); intimate partner violence (observed at both time points); school mobility (observed at both time points); behavior problems and sleep problems of children (observed at 37 months); and food insecurity (observed at both time points). The homeless assistance system does not currently provide immediate access to such subsidies for most families in shelter, although more than one-third of families without priority access nevertheless obtained some type of long-term housing subsidy during the 3-year followup period. The striking impacts of assignment to the SUB intervention in reducing subsequent stays in shelter and places not meant for human habitation provide support for the view that, for most families, homelessness is a housing affordability problem that can be remedied with long-term housing subsidies without specialized services.

HUD made a significant investment in the execution of the Family Options Study, and the research team generated a large volume of original data, in addition to accessing multiple sources of administrative data, which were analyzed to address the research questions posed by HUD at the outset of the study. Even with the production of three highly detailed reports developed under contract to HUD as a part of the original project specification, and a series of research briefs, many questions with valuable policy significance remain that could be pursued through additional analysis of the Family Options Study data. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is leveraging the platform provided by the study by supporting the development of a series of issue briefs addressing policy questions of interest to the mission of HHS.⁵

In order to maximize the value of these data resources, HUD is supporting the storage of the data resulting from the Family Options Study at the Center for Administration Records Research and Applications within the U.S. Census Bureau;⁶ see the Request for Proposals on page 497 of this issue. Qualified researchers will be able to access these data in order to conduct research to

⁵ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/homeless-families-research-briefs>.

⁶ <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Letter-of-Interest-MTO-Family-Option.pdf>.

address additional policy questions that can inform policymaking about the most effective ways to address homelessness among families with children. Although the Family Options Study sought to understand both the short-term and the long-term impacts of the various interventions that were studied, the long-term impacts were measured only 3 years after random assignment. Recent work published by Chetty, Hendren, and Katz (2016) demonstrated the value of a far more extended window of observation, particularly in studies that seek to understand the impacts of programs and policies designed to assist children. HUD hopes that by making the wealth of data collected while implementing the Family Options Study available to a broad set of researchers, additional findings and outcomes can be explored to support its efforts to pursue evidence-based approaches to address the pressing issue of family homelessness.

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