

Housing (In)Stability in Child Welfare

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers, educators, and other professionals engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-LInK Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful dialogue about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

In this issue, we were interested in exploring the intersection of housing instability and child welfare. The study sample included all parents and children involved in child protection or the parent support outreach program from 2019-2021 in six Minnesota counties. Through Minn-LInK, data from the Minnesota Department of Human Services and Minnesota's Homeless Management Information System were integrated to provide information on housing stability, child welfare services, and receipt of public assistance. Just over half of all families remained stably housed across the study period. Families who received intensive child welfare services were more likely to be homeless or unstably housed prior to, during, or after child welfare involvement than families who received only one type of child welfare service. African American and American Indian families were more likely to be unstably housed or homeless compared to other families.

Discussion on Practice Implications

- 1.** The study found that just over half of all families had stable housing either before, during, or after child welfare involvement. However, 66% of all families involved in the study experienced homelessness (43%) or unstable housing (23%) at some point during the study observation window. Why do you think those with greater housing instability have more child welfare system involvement than those who are stably housed? What challenges do families face when they are homeless or unstably housed?
- 2.** What practices and interventions are currently working to help families stay stably housed? What practices can we extend to families who are at risk of losing their stable housing before, during, and after working with the child welfare system? For families that come to the attention of child welfare with unstable housing or are experiencing homelessness, what interventions and practices can be utilized to help families become stably housed?
- 3.** Similar to other national research, this study showed that families who were homeless or unstably housed were more likely to experience intensive child welfare interventions, like child protection case management and out-of-home care. What policies and practices can we put into place to better identify and support the housing stability of families receiving intensive child welfare interventions? How might these practices be tailored to the unique strengths and needs of different local communities?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

- 1.** What systems and policy changes would need to occur to disentangle the child protection system's response to safety issues as compared to safety-net issues (i.e., food insecurity, homelessness, poverty)? What kind of training might be necessary to help child protection professionals, mandated reporters, and other community members understand the differences between the two?
- 2.** While child welfare workers often spend time focused on the housing needs of the families they work with, child welfare systems rarely identify housing needs in a strategic or systemic way. For example, the data system used in Minnesota to collect child welfare information (SSIS) has only one non-mandated question about homelessness, which is widely considered an inaccurate reflection of need. How can the state and counties better identify housing needs and implement strategies to connect families to appropriate housing resources?
- 3.** The advocacy and system change work necessary to improve child welfare outcomes and housing stability for families requires that child welfare agencies, homeless response and housing systems, community providers, and families have a voice and role in improving these systems. What are the opportunities for you and your agency to join in this work? What strategies can you and your organization bring to the table to better support families at the intersection of housing instability and child welfare?