



**HOMELESS FAMILIES
RESEARCH BRIEF**

OPRE Report No.
2017-26

March 2017

Child and Partner Transitions among Families Experiencing Homelessness

Douglas Walton, Lauren Dunton, and Lincoln Groves



About the Family Options Study

This research brief takes advantage of data collected for the Family Options Study, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The study involves 2,282 homeless families with children who entered shelter between late 2010 and early 2012 in one of twelve communities across the country chosen based on willingness to participate and ability to provide a sufficient sample size and range of interventions: Alameda County, CA; Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Bridgeport and New Haven, CT; Denver, CO; Honolulu, HI; Kansas City, MO; Louisville, KY; Minneapolis, MN; Phoenix, AZ; and Salt Lake City, UT. At the time they were recruited to participate in the study, each family had spent at least a week in an emergency shelter. The Family Options Study's main purpose is to determine whether the offer of a particular type of housing program—a short-term rent subsidy, a long-term rent subsidy, or a stay in a facility-based transitional program with intensive services—helps a homeless family achieve housing stability and other positive outcomes for family well-being. To provide the strongest possible evidence of the effects of the housing and services interventions, the study uses an experimental research design with random assignment of families to one of the types of housing programs or to a control group of “usual care” families that were left to find their own way out of shelter. For more information, see [Gubits et al., 2015](#) and [Gubits et al., 2016](#).

The study collected data from the families at the time they were recruited in emergency shelters, revealing that these are very poor families with significant levels of housing instability, weak work histories, and disabilities affecting both parents and children. The median age of the adults who responded to the survey was 29. Most had either one or two children with them in shelter. Seventy percent included only one adult, almost always the mother.

While the Family Options Study sample is not nationally representative, it has broad geographic coverage; and study families are similar in age and gender of parents, number and ages of children, and race and ethnicity to nationally representative samples of sheltered homeless families. Therefore, it is a good sample for studying the experience of families that have an episode of homelessness.

The study followed the families over the next 20 months and surveyed them again, collecting a rich set of information about sources of income, use of benefit programs, changes to the family's composition, and further episodes of homelessness. The 20-month survey also measured indicators of well-being such as the health and mental health of adults and children.

This is the fourth in a series of research briefs commissioned by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that draws on the Family Options Study to inform HHS and HHS grantees as they carry out their special responsibilities for preventing and ending the homelessness of families, children, and youth. Topics of briefs already published include connections of homeless families to the social safety net and the well-being of young children and adolescents following an episode of sheltered homelessness.

The analysis conducted for this brief does not use the experimental design of the Family Options Study. Instead, the brief explores the composition of the families during and after their experience of homelessness, regardless of the intervention to which the families were randomly assigned. This brief describes the experiences of the study's 1,857 adult heads of households, 677 other adults identified as their spouses or partners, and the 4,341 children who were part of the families at shelter entry.

Highlights:

New research supports the idea that housing and family instability are related, and families who stay in emergency shelter have dynamic family structures. Policymakers and practitioners should seek to understand parent-child and parent-partner separations and reunifications within families experiencing homelessness.

- About 30 percent of sheltered homeless families reported separation from at least one family member.
- Family transitions continued in the 20 months after being in emergency shelter. For example, 10 percent of families experienced new child separations, while 8 percent reported reunification with children who had not been with the family in the shelter.
- Placements involving the child welfare system were rare at the time homeless families were staying in emergency shelter, but the incidence of such out-of-family placements grew over time.
- Separation from children while in emergency shelter was associated with additional housing instability in the 20 months following a shelter stay.
- Additional housing instability following the families' initial stay in shelter was associated with child separations as of 20 months later.

This brief primarily draws on data from the Family Options Study, but also uses custom tabulations from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). These tabulations are used to compare the rates of child and spouse/partner separation for Family Options Study families with rates of separation for all households with income below 50 percent of the federal poverty level. SIPP tabulations were conducted by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). The tabulations were drawn from the SIPP Wave 8 panel (collected December 2010 to March 2011) and the Wave 13 panel (collected August 2012 to November 2012), which correspond roughly to the periods of baseline and 20-month survey data collection for Family Options Study families.

Introduction

Previous research has found that families who use emergency shelters often experience separations between mothers and children before, during, and after their stay in a shelter. Their rates of separations are higher than those of poor housed families (Cowan et al., 2002). A family's composition may change several times during its use of the shelter system. For example, a child may not be with the family during one shelter stay but be reunited in a subsequent stay in the same shelter or in a different homeless assistance program (Spellman et al., 2010).

Family separations in the shelter system may happen for various reasons. Some homeless assistance programs do not accept families with men or teenaged boys, which might result in either a partner or a child being separated from the family. Alternatively a parent may send his or her children to live in what he or she perceives to be a safer environment with relatives or family rather than subjecting them to the experience of a shelter. Some parents may feel unable to care for their children because of mental health, substance abuse, or other personal challenges. In other cases, child welfare agencies may have removed children from their parent's custodial care.

The experience of homelessness may also be associated with subsequent family separations. Studies of children staying in shelters have documented high levels of subsequent out-of-family placements (that is, placements in which the child welfare system was involved) compared to the out-of-family placements of housed families in the same city (Park et al., 2004; Cowan et al., 2002; Hayes, Zonneville and Bassuk, 2013). Furthermore, separation from parents and the child's family of origin can be a predictor of future homelessness in adulthood, making this an important topic for exploration (Rog and Buckner, 2007).

This brief examines the extent to which parents were separated from their children or adult partners, including spouses,¹ during a stay in emergency shelter and whether they experienced additional separations or reunifications in the 20 months following the shelter stay. It also considers whether family separations while in shelter are associated with additional housing instability following the shelter stay, as well as whether continued housing instability is associated with subsequent family separations.

About 30 percent of families staying in emergency shelters reported separation from at least one family member

About 30 percent of families who had been in emergency shelters for a minimum of 7 days² reported either that at least one of the family's children was not with the family in the shelter or that the family head had an adult partner who was not present.

Almost a quarter (24 percent) of families reported that one or more of the family's children was not present in the shelter (Exhibit 1).³ This is broadly consistent with previous research showing high levels of child separations among homeless families (Burt et al., 1999). Older children were more likely to be separated from the parent in shelter than younger children. About 8 percent of children 5 years and younger were separated from the family, in contrast to about 25 percent of children over age 5.

Thirty-seven percent of family heads reported that they had an adult partner (with the family in shelter or not). This percentage is somewhat lower than the estimated 40 percent of households in deep poverty that report having a spouse or partner living in the household.⁴ Of the sheltered homeless families who reported that they had an adult partner, 27 percent (or 10 percent of all families) reported that the partner was not present in the shelter.⁵

¹ Throughout this brief, "adult partners" include both spouses and unmarried partners of the family head.

² To be eligible for the Family Options Study, a family had to have been in shelter for 7 or more days and have at least one child age 15 or younger with them in the shelter. A typical family in the study included a woman about 29 years old who had 1 or 2 children with her.

³ Unless otherwise stated, the analysis sample for this brief consists of the 1,857 families who responded to the 20 month follow-up survey and the people that the head of family reported were part of his or her family, whether or not they were with him or her in shelter. Most family heads were women, but some were men. All families had at least one child in the emergency shelter.

⁴ National benchmark comparisons are based on tabulations of data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which were conducted by Lincoln Groves in ASPE. For both the Family Options Study data and SIPP data, adult partners of the family head include both spouses and unmarried partners. Households in deep poverty are defined as households with income less than half of the federal poverty level (FPL).

⁵ A smaller share of all families experienced both partner and child separations while in shelter. About 3 percent of families reported that a spouse or partner was separated from the family and also that at least one child was not with the family.

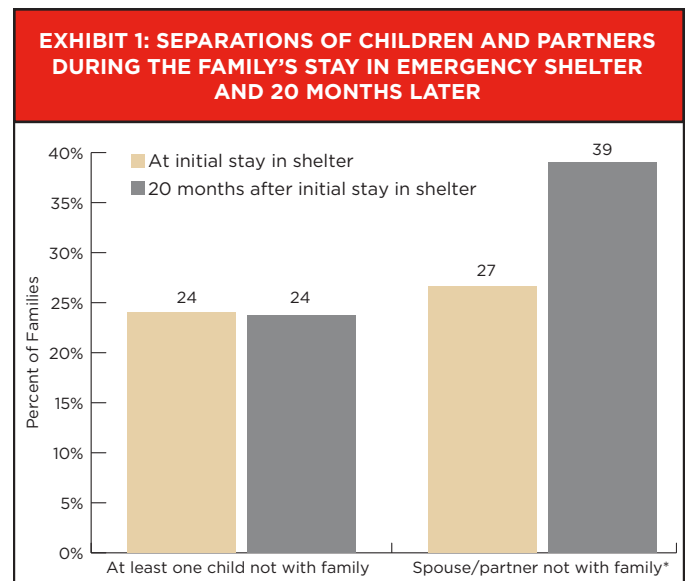
Homeless families continued to experience family transitions in the 20 months following a stay in shelter

Twenty months after they stayed in emergency shelter, families continued to experience separations from children or adult partners. Twenty months later, 24 percent of families reported that at least one of their children was not currently living with them, the same rate of separation reported as the initial stay in shelter. Thirty-nine percent of families with an adult partner at baseline reported that the partner was not with the family 20 months later, greater than the 27 percent reported in shelter (Exhibit 1).⁶

THE STABLE OVERALL RATE OF CHILD SEPARATIONS MASKS CHURN WITHIN FAMILIES

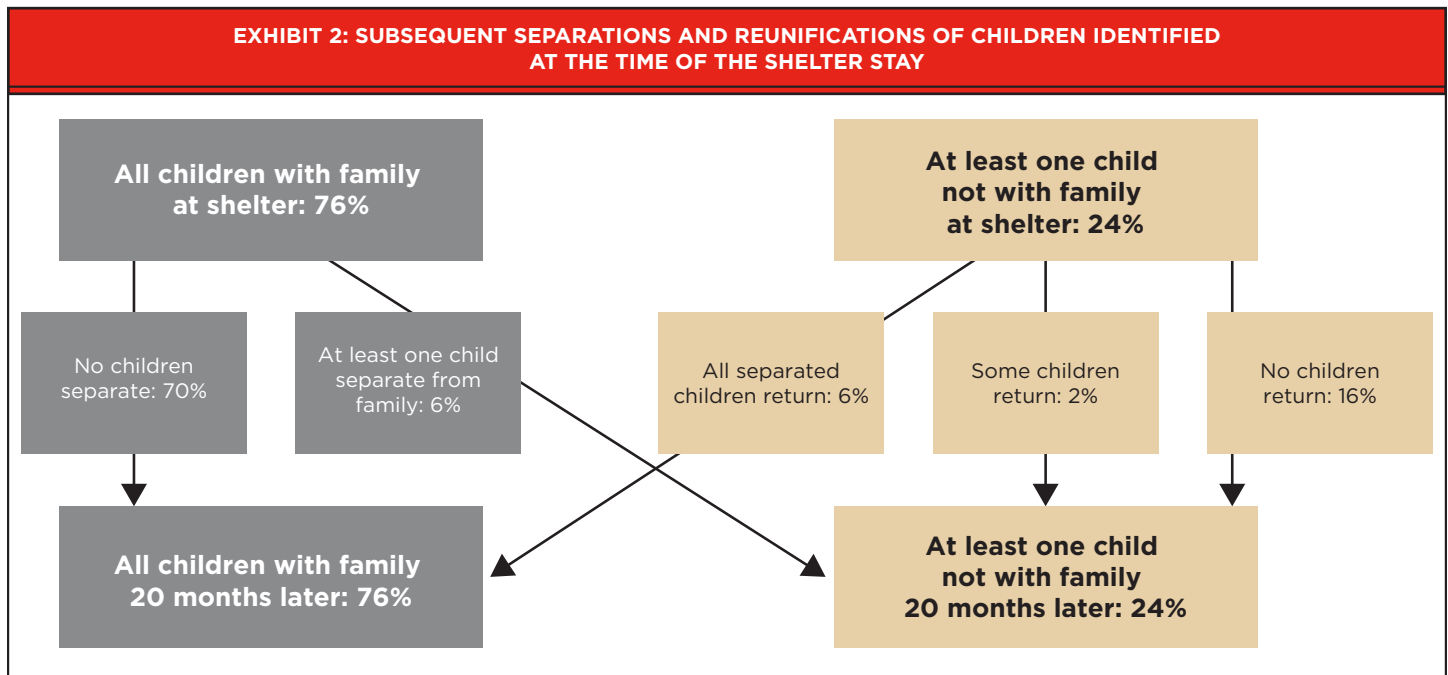
While the overall rate at which families were separated from their children was about the same in shelter and 20 months later, a number of families reported children returning to or separating from the family during this period. Ten percent of families reported that a child who was with the family in shelter was no longer with the family 20 months later. Six percent of these separations were from families with all children present in shelter (Exhibit 2), and the additional 4 percent were from families who already had at least one child separated from them during the shelter stay (not shown on exhibit).

In addition, 8 percent of families reported that at least one child who was not with the family while in shelter had returned to the family; 6 percent of families reported that all children who were not with them in shelter had returned, while 2 percent reported that some (but not all) of their separated children had returned (Exhibit 2).



Source: Family Options Study baseline survey and 20 month follow-up survey for the 1,857 families who completed the follow-up survey. Partners and children are the people identified by the family head at the time of the initial stay in shelter and do not include people subsequently identified by the family head in tracking or follow-up surveys.

*Among the 37 percent of families reporting a spouse/partner the spouse/partner difference is statistically significant at .01 level

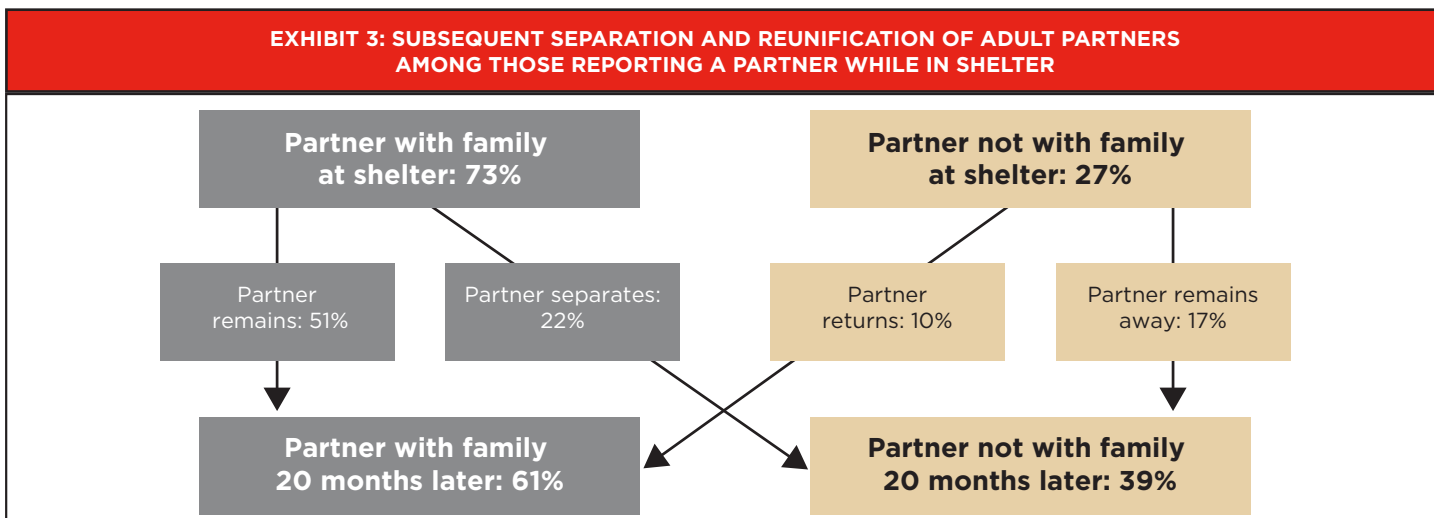


Note: The children shown in this exhibit do not include additional children identified in follow-up surveys (e.g., children born or adopted since study enrollment).

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, differences described in the narrative are statistically significant at the .01 level.

AFTER 20 MONTHS, MORE ADULT PARTNERS WERE SEPARATED FROM FAMILIES THAN REUNITED

An estimated 37 percent of family heads reported at the time of the shelter stay that they had a partner, and many of these families experienced changes in family composition over time. For more than a fifth of those families (22 percent), a partner with the family in the shelter was no longer with the family 20 months later, while for 10 percent a partner who had not been in the shelter was now with the family. Altogether, 39 percent of those with a partner (or 15 percent of all families) reported that their partner was not with the family in its current situation 20 months after a shelter stay, higher than the 27 percent (10 percent of all families) reporting a separated partner while in shelter (Exhibit 3).



Note: These are spouses and partners identified by the family head at the time of enrollment in the study. New partners identified in follow-up surveys are not included in these tabulations.

Partner separations among homeless families were slightly higher than for all families in deep poverty

The rates of child separations for sheltered homeless families were similar to rates for all families in deep poverty. About 12 percent of families in deep poverty reported a child becoming separated over a 20 month period, which is similar to the 10 percent rate of new separations during a period of the same length for families who had been in emergency shelter.⁷

In contrast, the 22 percent of sheltered homeless families with new separations from partners over a 20 month period is slightly higher than 15 percent of such separations among deeply poor families.

Formal out-of-family placements of children were rare among families in shelter but increased over time

Less than 1 percent of families reported a child in foster care during an initial interview conducted while the families were in emergency shelters. Twenty months later, about 3 percent of families reported that at least one child had been placed in foster care during the past 6 months.⁸

A “fishbowl effect,” or elevated scrutiny by shelter staff of families and their parenting practices, may make families who stay in emergency shelter or transitional housing programs at greater likelihood to foster care placements (Park et al., 2004). In qualitative interviews with a small sample of study families, some parents reported that staff of a shelter or another homeless assistance program had raised with the parent the prospect of “CPS” (Child Protective Services) (Mayberry et al., 2015).

Alternatively, the increase in proportion of families with foster care placements may simply reflect the continued poverty and housing instability of families following an episode of homelessness and the greater amount of time elapsed during which an out-of-family placement could have occurred. However, as described below, housing stability was related to out-of-family placements as well as to other measures of family transitions, suggesting that the passage of time was not the only influence on foster care placements.⁹

⁷ Based on tabulations from the SIPP performed by ASPE. Tabulations of both the Family Options Study data and the SIPP data include both spouses and unmarried partners, and exclude children who were born or adopted by the family during the 20-month period.

⁸ Differences between the baseline and follow-up survey question may also affect results. The baseline question asked whether any child was currently in foster care, while the follow-up question asked whether any child had been in foster care at any point in the six months prior to the survey.

⁹ Gubits et al. (2015) found differential effects of the interventions studied on foster care placements. Relative to usual care, assignment to the subsidy intervention (which offered families priority access to a permanent housing subsidy) reduced foster care placements in the 6 months before the survey by more than half (from 5.0 to 1.9 percent of families).

Family separations are related to housing instability

Since both homelessness and family separations represent significant challenges for families, an important question is whether these two situations are related. On the basis of the study design, we cannot determine whether there is a causal relationship between family separations and housing instability—whether one leads to the other or other factors affect both.¹⁰ However, we conduct an exploratory analysis to assess whether some relationship might exist. First, we explore whether families who reported separations while in shelter were more likely to experience subsequent housing instability. Then, we examine whether continued housing instability, as of 20 months after the shelter stay, is associated with family separations at that time.

FAMILIES WHO WERE SEPARATED FROM CHILDREN WHILE IN SHELTER EXPERIENCED MORE HOUSING INSTABILITY OVER THE NEXT 20 MONTHS

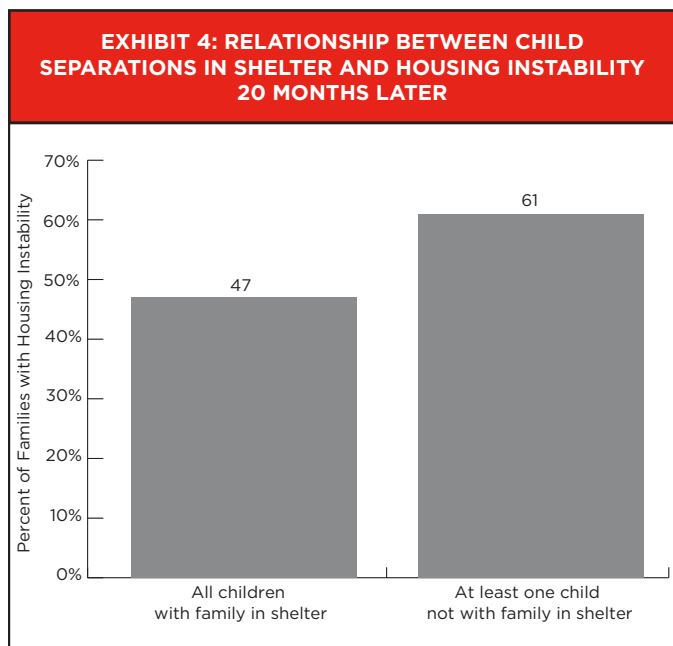
Families who reported a child separated from the family while in shelter were more likely twenty months later than families without such a separation to have spent at least one night in a shelter or a place not suitable for human habitation or been doubled up with another family at some time during the prior six months,¹¹ or had a stay in emergency shelter during the prior 12 months (Exhibit 4).¹² Twenty months after the initial shelter stay, 61 percent of families who had reported that at least one child was not with the family in shelter had recently experienced such housing instability. Only 47 percent of families without a separated child while in shelter had recent housing instability as of 20 months later.¹³

Twenty months after a shelter stay, about 56 percent of the families who had reported a separated partner while in shelter had recent experiences of housing instability, compared to only 47 percent of families who did not have a partner separated while in shelter. However, this difference is not statistically significant.

TWENTY MONTHS AFTER AN INITIAL SHELTER STAY, FAMILIES WITH RECENT HOUSING INSTABILITY HAD MORE CHILD SEPARATIONS

Twenty months after staying in emergency shelter, families who had experienced recent housing instability were more likely to report that a child or partner was separated from the family (Exhibit 5).¹⁴ Thirty-seven percent of families who had experienced recent housing instability reported a child separated from the family at 20 months, while only 15 percent of families who had not experienced recent housing instability reported a separated child.¹⁵

Among families reporting that a partner was present in the emergency shelter, 40 percent of families who had experienced recent housing instability reported that the partner was no longer with the family at 20 months, compared to 35 percent of families who had not experienced recent housing instability. This difference is not statistically significant.



Note: “Housing Instability” is defined as at least one night homeless or doubled up in the past 6 months, or in emergency shelter in the past 12 months. Difference is statistically significant at .05 level.

Source: Family Options Study baseline survey and 20 month follow-up survey

¹⁰ The exception to this statement is that the study was set up to determine whether priority access to a housing intervention led to greater housing stability or greater family stability. Since access to a permanent housing subsidy had both impacts, the analysis reported in this section is limited to the sample of 573 families that did not receive priority access to any of the housing interventions (the “usual care” group). This ensures that any observed associations between homelessness and family transitions are not driven by the assigned intervention.

¹¹ The survey question asked whether the doubling up was because of inability to find or afford housing.

¹² This composite definition of housing instability is used as the Family Options Study’s “confirmatory outcome” subject to additional statistical tests to ensure that measured impacts did not occur by chance.

¹³ Difference is statistically significant at the .05 level.

¹⁴ This analysis continues to use the study’s composite measure of housing instability and to be based on the portion of the sample assigned to usual care.

¹⁵ Difference is statistically significant at the .05 level.

Conclusion

This analysis illuminates the dynamics of families who experience homelessness in emergency shelters. Many of these families were separated from children and adult partners, both while in shelter and 20 months later. The families experienced significant instability in their composition over this period. Many families were reunited with their partners or children, while others experienced new separations. While formal separation of children at shelter entry was not common, 20 months later additional families reported placement of children in foster care.

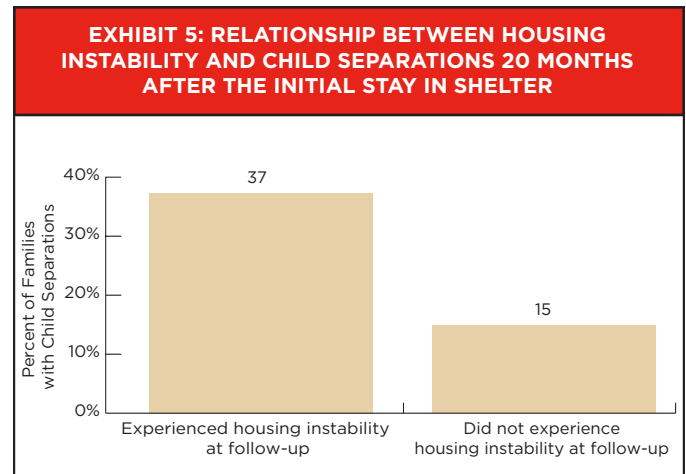
Housing instability and family separations appear to be related: families who reported separated children while in an initial shelter stay were more likely to experience subsequent housing instability; and families who experienced subsequent housing instability were more likely to report separation from their children 20 months later. These observations are based on non-experimental analysis and thus do not demonstrate a causal relationship. However, they do suggest that a relationship may exist between housing instability and family transitions across time, especially child separations. The rates of partner separations appear to be somewhat higher than rates for a national sample of deeply poor families, indicating that homelessness may contribute to family transitions, or that family dynamics may affect housing stability.

This analysis has several implications for policy and practice. Administrators of programs that serve homeless families should recognize that there are a significant number of informal child and partner separations and consider whether their current policies allow all family members to stay with the family. Emergency shelters that receive HUD funding are now required to permit adolescent males and male heads of households to stay with their families.¹⁶

Although formal foster care placements were rare while families were in emergency shelter (less than one percent of families), placements grew over time. This has implications for child welfare practices. Data from the national Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) shows that, for at least 10 percent of children formally placed into foster care, at least one reason for the placement was inadequate housing. Collecting information on a family's housing status during child welfare investigation, intake, and monitoring may allow child welfare agencies to help families limit and avoid periods of housing instability.

Overall, providers serving families experiencing homelessness should also recognize that families are dynamic – the composition of the household may change over time, and thus the family's service and housing needs may change.

The apparent relationship between housing instability and child separations suggest that efforts to reduce homelessness may have an added effect of reducing family separations, and vice-versa. Further study on the causal relationships between homelessness and family stability and child separations would be worthwhile.



Source: Family Options Study 20 month follow-up survey

Notes: Difference is statistically significant at .05 level.

“Children” refers to individuals identified by the family head at the time of the initial stay in shelter, and does not include those subsequently identified by the family head in follow-up surveys (e.g., who may have been born or adopted in the following 20 months).

“Housing Instability” is defined as at least one night homeless or doubled up in the past 6 months, or in emergency shelter in the past 12 months

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 24 CFR Part 578, RIN 2506-AC29. Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Continuum of Care Program, Interim Rule.

References

- Burt, M., Aron, L. Y., Douglas, T., Valente, J., Lee, E., & Iwen, B. (1999). Homelessness: Programs and the people they serve. Urban Institute. Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients.
- Cowal, K., Shinn, M., Weitzman, B. C., Stojanovic, D., & Labay, L. (2002). Mother-child separations among homeless and housed families receiving public assistance in New York City, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30 (5): 711-730.
- Gubits, D., Shinn, M., Bell, S., Wood, M., Dastrup, S., Solari, C., Brown, S. R., McInnis, D., McCall, T., & Kattel, U. (2016). Family Options Study: Long-term impacts of housing and service interventions for homeless families, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Gubits, D., Shinn, M., Bell, S., Wood, M., Dastrup, S., Solari, C., D., Brown, S. R., Brown, S., Dunton, L., Lin, W., McInnis, D., Rodriguez, J., Savidge, G., & Spellman, B. E. (2015). Family Options Study: Short-term impacts of housing and services interventions for homeless families. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Hayes, M. A., Zonneville, M., & Bassuk, E.L. (2013). The SHIFT study: Final report. Waltham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.
- Mayberry, L.S., Shinn, M., Benton, J.S., & Wise, J. (2014). "Families experiencing housing instability: The effects of housing programs on family routines and rituals," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 84 (1): 95-109.
- Park, J.M., Mettraux, S., Broadbar, G., & Culhane, D.P. (2004). Child welfare involvement among children in homeless families. *Child Welfare* 83: 423-436.
- Rog, Debra J., & John C. Buckner, J. C. 2007. Toward understanding homelessness: The 2007 national symposium on homelessness research. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research.
- Spellman, B., Khadduri, J., Sokol, B., & Leopold, J. Costs associated with first-time homelessness for families and individuals. Bethesda: MD: Abt Associates. Prepared for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, and Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs.

**Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families,
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) studies Administration for Children and Families (ACF) programs and the populations they serve through rigorous research and evaluation projects. These include evaluations of existing programs, evaluations of innovative approaches to helping low-income children and families, research syntheses and descriptive and exploratory studies. www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre

**Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE),
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) is the principal advisor to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on policy development, and is responsible for major activities in policy coordination, legislation development, strategic planning, policy research, evaluation, and economic analysis. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/>



PROJECT OFFICERS:

Emily Schmitt, OPRE, ACF
Carli Wulff, OPRE, ACF
Amanda Benton ASPE, HHS

PROJECT DIRECTOR:

Lauren Dunton, Abt Associates

CONTRACT NO:

HHSP23320095624WC



**BOLD
THINKERS
DRIVING
REAL-WORLD
IMPACT**

4550 Montgomery Avenue
Suite 800 North
Bethesda, MD 20814-3343

ABOUT ABT ASSOCIATES

Abt Associates is a mission-driven, global leader in research, evaluation and implementing programs in the fields of health, social and environmental policy, and international development. Known for its rigorous approach to solving complex challenges, Abt Associates is regularly ranked as one of the top 20 global research firms and one of the top 40 international development innovators. The company has multiple offices in the U.S. and program offices in more than 40 countries.