

Issue BRIEF

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EVALUATING HOUSING PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH WHO AGE OUT OF FOSTER CARE

INTRODUCTION

Youth who age out of foster care face a variety of challenges during the transition to adulthood. Among the greatest may be achieving housing stability. In fact, several studies published during the past two decades have found high rates of homelessness among former foster youth (for example, Dworsky and Courtney, 2010; Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney, 2013; Fowler, Toro, and Miles, 2009). Although a number of programs have been developed to address the housing needs of this population, almost nothing about their effect on youth outcomes is known.

This issue brief was produced as part of the Housing for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care (HYAOFC) study, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The brief focuses on the importance of evaluating housing programs for this population, the barriers to evaluating them, and how the field can move forward to build the evidence base in this area.

WHAT DOES THE EXISTING ARRAY OF HOUSING PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH WHO HAVE AGED OUT OF FOSTER CARE LOOK LIKE?

As part of the HYAOFC study, the research team conducted a review of the literature, profiled nearly 60 state and local programs that provided housing or housing assistance to youth who have aged out of foster care, and developed a program typology (Dworsky et al., 2012). Patterns observed across a number of key dimensions suggested that most of the programs could be categorized as falling into one of three broad groups: (1) programs that provide single-site housing and a high

level of supervision, (2) programs that provide scattered-site housing or rental assistance and a low level of supervision, and (3) programs that provide more than one type of housing with different levels of supervision.¹ (Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of programs within each category.)

In addition to these programs, HUD's Family Unification Program (FUP) provides housing choice vouchers to former foster youth, ages 18 to 21, whose housing is inadequate and who were at least age 16 when they exited foster care.² The program is typically administered by a state or local public housing agency (PHA) in partnership with a state or local public child welfare agency (PCWA). More than 90 PHAs

¹ For a description of the housing typology, see http://www.huduser.org/publications/pdf/HousingFosterCare_LiteratureReview_0412_v2.pdf.

² FUP has been providing housing choice vouchers to families whose children have been placed in foster care, are at imminent risk of foster care placement, or cannot be returned to home because of a lack of adequate housing since 1992. It was not until 2000 that youth became eligible.

Typology of Housing Programs

Dimensions	Single-Site Programs	Scattered-Site Programs	Mixed Models
Supervision/ support	Onsite staff, usually available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.	Periodic contact with case manager, who may make home visits. Contact can range from as little as once per month to more than once per week.	Varies
Housing	Single building or complex or multiple buildings on the same street owned by the agency running the program or a housing developer partnered with that agency.	Units throughout the community rented from landlords or property managers by the youth or by the agency running the program.	Combination of single-site, scattered-site, and host home housing
Staff	On site, usually available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.	Periodic contact with case manager, who may make home visits..	Varies
Delivery of supportive services	Often delivered on site, but may be provided by community-based agencies.	Often provided by community-based agencies but may be provided at a central location.	Varies
Transitional or permanent housing	Youth remain in unit only while they are in the program.	Youth can often remain in the unit and take over the lease when program participation ends.	Varies
Level of independent living	Stepping stone toward independent living.	More mainstream housing experience.	Providing options enables youth to move between housing types as needs change

Table 1

and their partner PCWAs in communities across the country are currently using FUP to serve former foster youth (Dion et al., 2014).

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THESE PROGRAMS?

It is common practice for housing programs to track the characteristics of the youth they serve, the services youth receive while they are in the

program, and the outcomes of youth at exit. These data may be used for internal monitoring and are often needed to comply with funding-related reporting requirements. Some housing programs have also engaged in evaluation activities such as client satisfaction surveys.

A problem arises, however, when providers cite outcome data as evidence that their housing programs are effective. For example, providers may report the percentage of program participants who were working or enrolled in

³To be sure, it is not only housing programs for youth who age out of foster care that have not been subjected to rigorous evaluation. For example, the same could be said of independent living programs that target other domains, such as education or employment, and of housing programs for youth who are homeless.

⁴One exception is the Transitional Housing Placement-Plus (THP-Plus) Participant Tracking System, which collects data 6 and 12 months after program exit to measure longer term outcomes. THP-Plus is a state-funded transitional supportive housing program for former foster youth in California. For more information about THP-Plus, see <http://thplusplus.org/>.

school when they exited the program. Although rates of school enrollment and employment may be higher than they were at program entry, participating in the program was not necessarily the cause of that increase. Participants may have fared equally well in the absence of the program.³

Tracking data are also limited in terms of information about the effectiveness of these programs because, with perhaps a few notable exceptions, youth are not routinely followed after they leave the program.⁴ Although it is important to know how youth are faring when they exit, their outcomes in the longer term are just as important when it comes to assessing program effects. For example, are youth who exited to permanent housing still stably housed 6 or 12 months later?

WHY DO THESE PROGRAMS NEED TO BE EVALUATED?

Housing programs for youth who age out of foster care should be evaluated for several reasons. First, a growing body of research has found that youth aging out of foster care are at high risk of experiencing unstable housing and becoming homeless. Referring youth to programs from which they are unlikely to benefit in the end does a disservice to them. Second, the population of youth aging out of foster care is not homogeneous, and different youth have different needs. At present, little evidence exists on which to base decisions about which youth should be referred to which programs. Third, funding for programs that provide housing to youth who age out of foster care is limited. These limited resources should be invested in programs that have been demonstrated to produce better youth outcomes. Finally, despite the growing emphasis on implementing social programs that are evidence based, no evidence base exists for the provision of housing assistance to youth who age out of care. Scant evidence, therefore, guides the decisions of policymakers, program developers, or service providers who want to develop new programs that address this population's housing needs.

WHAT WOULD AN EVALUATION LOOK LIKE?

An impact study of housing programs for youth who have aged out of foster care ideally would use an experimental design with youth randomly assigned to participate in the housing program (treatment condition) or not to participate in the housing program (control condition). This design is considered the gold standard for assessing program impacts because, when random assignment

Experimental Evaluations of FUP for Families

The Family Housing Study, funded by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), is using a randomized control design to examine the Family Unification Program's (FUP's) impact on housing stability, out-of-home care placement, and child well-being among families experiencing a child maltreatment investigation in Chicago. The study is being conducted by Patrick Fowler at Washington University's George Warren Brown School of Social Work. An experimental evaluation of FUP's impact on youth outcomes would be more difficult because fewer youth than families tend to be served with FUP vouchers.

The Urban Institute's Child Welfare and Housing Impact and Cost Study is examining whether providing FUP vouchers to families (1) reduces the foster care placement of children among families at imminent risk of having their children removed, (2) reduces homelessness among child welfare-involved families, or (3) reduces the costs associated with homelessness and child welfare service involvement. Researchers are using a quasi-experimental design that will include 800 families (400 treatment and 400 comparison) across four sites. Outcomes will be measured using administrative data from three sources: child welfare agencies, homeless service providers, and public housing agencies. This study is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and conducted by Mary Cunningham and Michael Pergamit.

is implemented correctly, any differences between the outcomes of treatment group youth and the outcomes of control group youth can be attributed to the intervention (that is, the housing program) and not to other factors.

Using an experimental design would yield the most rigorous evaluation. Random assignment may not be feasible, however, because many of the housing programs for youth who age out of foster care are small and limited to a single location. Moreover, even when a program is implemented in multiple locations, as is the case with FUP, variation in implementation would limit the ability to pool across sites. A more viable alternative might be to use a quasi-experimental design, which would involve estimating the impact of a housing program on a treatment group by comparing their outcomes with the outcomes of a comparison group of nonparticipants. The nonparticipant comparison group could include eligible youth from the same community who do not participate in the program or youth from another site who would have been eligible if the program had been implemented in their community.

Quasi-experimental designs are a viable alternative when random assignment is not feasible. A carefully chosen comparison group is key to using quasi-experimental designs.

The biggest concern raised when quasi-experimental methods are used is selection bias; that is, preexisting systematic differences between the treatment and comparison groups that may be correlated with the outcomes of interest. For example, if youth in the treatment group are more motivated than those in the comparison group, any difference in group outcomes may be because of motivation rather than the impact of the program. Hence, key to using a quasi-experimental design to estimate the impact of a program is a carefully chosen comparison group that is as similar to the treatment group as possible. Although a number of sophisticated analytical techniques have been developed to statistically control for the effects of differences between treatment and comparison groups, each has limitations. That said, in the right circumstances, a well-conceived, quasi-experimental design can provide valid estimates of program impacts.

Moreover, regardless of whether an experimental or quasi-experimental design is used, any evaluation of housing programs for youth who age out of foster care should be longitudinal in nature. Program impacts should be assessed not only on short-term outcomes that are measured at the point of program exit, but also on longer term outcomes. At a minimum, this process would involve following youth for 12 to 24 months after the program period ends and, ideally, would involve following them for several years after their exit from foster care.

Even if the ultimate interest is whether housing programs for youth who age out of foster care are improving youth outcomes, it would be important for evaluations of those programs to include not only impact studies that measure program effects but also process studies that focus on implementation. By answering questions about who is being served, what services they are receiving, and how those services are being delivered, process studies can provide information not about whether housing programs for youth who age out of foster care are being implemented as planned, but also about any barriers to implementation that have been encountered. This information can be essential to understanding why the intended outcomes were or were not achieved. It can also be useful to those who design and implement programs.

WHAT OUTCOMES WOULD AN EVALUATION MEASURE?

One of the big unanswered questions about housing programs for youth who age out of foster care is whether participating in these programs is helping young people avoid homelessness and remain stably housed. Any evaluation of these programs should not limit its focus to housing-related outcomes, however, for two reasons. First, stable housing is best thought of as not only an end but also a means to other ends. Being stably housed is likely to help young people become self-sufficient through education and employment. It also is likely to promote other aspects of well-being such as physical and mental health.

Second, although a few of the housing programs for youth who age out of foster care reviewed by Dworsky et al. (2012) provide only financial assistance to help youth pay for their housing, most combine actual housing or a subsidy for housing with case management and other supportive services. In FUP, the state or local PCWA is required to offer supportive services to youth with FUP vouchers.

Although the range of services offered varies across housing programs, those services are often aimed at promoting self-sufficiency and developing independent living skills. Some programs also offer services for more special populations, such as counseling for youth with mental health problems or parenting education for youth who are parents.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO EVALUATION?

Rigorously evaluating housing programs for youth who age out of foster care presents several challenges. First, one of the factors that can limit the feasibility of using an experimental design is reluctance on the part of service providers to randomly assign youth to treatment and control conditions. In some cases, service providers may want to decide which youth participate in their program and for that reason oppose leaving that decision up to chance. For example, they may believe that certain youth should participate either because they are the most needy or because they are the most likely to benefit. In other cases, service providers may be averse to random assignment because they interpret it to mean that some youth will be denied services. Because most housing programs do not have the capacity to serve all eligible youth, however, random assignment can be presented as the fairest way to allocate limited resources.

A second challenge to evaluating housing programs for youth who have aged out of foster care that applies equally to experimental and quasi-experimental designs is that few programs provide housing to more than two or three dozen young people at a point in time. In fact, many serve considerably fewer. Moreover, young people can often remain in these programs for 12 to 24 months. Such a low turnover rate means that a very long observation period would be needed to create a large enough sample for program impacts to be detected by a rigorous evaluation. For example, with 80 percent power, approximately 300 youth would be needed in both the treatment and control groups to detect a 10-point difference in the percentage of youth with stable housing at followup.

Another likely challenge to evaluating housing programs for youth who age out of foster care stems from the need to follow youth over time. As already noted, any evaluation of housing programs for this population should have a longitudinal design so that program impacts can be measured on longer term outcomes. Although a more extended followup period is desirable, sample attrition is likely to grow the longer youth are followed.

The experiences of the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs team illustrate how formidable these challenges can be. *The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999*,⁵ which created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to help prepare youth aging out foster care for the transition to adulthood, requires that funding be set aside to rigorously evaluate independent living programs that are “innovative or of potential national significance.” In 2003, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) contracted with the Urban Institute and its partners, Chapin Hall and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, to conduct the Multi-Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs. The evaluation team wanted to include a housing program among the sites that were selected. The housing programs they considered served too few youth, however, to allow for random assignment, and sample sizes would have been too small to detect between-group differences.

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS TO PREPARE FOR AN EVALUATION?

Building an evidence base for programs that provide housing to youth who age out of foster care will require an investment in and commitment to evaluation. Given the challenges described previously, it is likely that creative, possibly quasi-experimental approaches will need to be used. In addition, it may be necessary to conduct multisite evaluations. Pooling data across the sites with similar housing programs might yield enough statistical power to detect a program effect, but variation in context and model implementation could limit the feasibility of this approach.

Before this evaluative work can happen, however, a number of steps need to be taken. First, promising programs will need to be identified. Promising programs might include programs for which the tracking data they collect provide some evidence of positive outcomes. The review by Dworsky et al. (2012) could serve as a useful starting point for identifying programs that are promising.

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⁵Public Law 106-169.

Promising programs may also emerge from among the recipients of 18 planning grants recently awarded by ACF to develop intervention models for youth who are or were in foster care and who are most likely to experience homelessness or unstable housing during the transition to adulthood. Grantees are expected to focus on improving outcomes in the four core areas identified by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) Framework to End Youth Homelessness: stable housing, permanent connections, education and employment, and social-emotional well-being. At the end of the 2-year planning period, grantees will have an opportunity to apply for funding to implement and evaluate their intervention model. Because stable housing is one of the core outcomes, the intervention models are likely to include a housing component.

Mathematica Policy Research will be assessing the evaluability of the intervention models as part of a technical assistance effort sponsored by ACF. An evaluability assessment is a systematic process undertaken to determine whether a program evaluation is not only feasible but also likely to yield meaningful information.

Third, depending on the results of the evaluability assessment, it may be necessary to help the housing program develop or refine its logic model. A logic model is a simple description of how a program is understood, including the inputs or resources that will be used to implement the program, the outputs or activities that will be performed, and the outcomes that are expected to be achieved. Logic models are critical evaluation tools because they identify the processes and outcomes that should be measured to determine whether programs are being implemented as planned and whether they are producing the expected outcomes.

Evaluability Assessment

- Does the program have a logic model linking intended outcomes to program components?
- What is the program's target population and how large is it?
- What are the characteristics of the youth being served?
- What is the referral process?
- Is random assignment feasible given the referral flow?
- Does the demand for services exceed the number of youth who can be served?

DEVELOPMENTS UNDER WAY

At least two programs, the California-based First Place for Youth (FPFY) and the New York City-based Chelsea Foyer, are already moving forward with evaluation efforts. FPFY, which operates transitional housing programs in Alameda and Los Angeles Counties, recently underwent a formative evaluation by an external evaluator (FPFY, 2013). During the next 19 to 24 months, a feasibility study will be conducted to assess FPFY's readiness for an impact evaluation of its program using the most rigorous research design possible. The feasibility study is expected to lead to a set of recommendations for next steps.

The Chelsea Foyer, a transitional housing program for youth aging out of foster care and youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in New York City, was evaluated internally. Now, the New York City Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence is evaluating the effects of the Chelsea Foyer program using a quasi-experimental design. Administrative data from state and local agencies will be used to compare the outcomes of Chelsea Foyer alumni with the outcomes of young people who were eligible for, but did not receive supportive housing under, the New York/New York III agreement.⁶ Among the outcomes that will be measured are criminal justice system involvement, shelter stays, and receipt of welfare benefits.

⁶The New York/New York III Supportive Housing Agreement is a commitment by New York State and New York City to create 9,000 new supportive housing units for nine populations, including youth aging out of foster care and at risk of homelessness. Applicants found to be eligible by the New York City Human Resources Administration are placed in supportive housing through a process overseen by public agencies and housing providers.

CONCLUSION

The lack of rigorous evaluations of housing programs for young people who age out of foster care makes it uncertain whether any of these programs are preventing homelessness or otherwise reducing housing instability. As long as young people are participating in the program, they have stable housing and are not at imminent risk of becoming homeless. It is far from clear, however, that participating in these programs is helping young people avoid homelessness and remain stably housed after they exit. Given the number of housing programs for youth who age out of foster care that already exist, and given the potential for the development of new programs to serve this population in the future, high-quality evaluation of these programs may be more critical than ever.

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