Scaling up housing services within the child welfare system: Policy insights from simulation modeling

Patrick J. Fowler, Katherine E. Marcal, Saras Chung, Derek S. Brown, Melissa Jonson-Reid, & Peter S. Hovmand

Washington University in St. Louis

Objectives: Each year, the child welfare system investigates nearly 3.5 million children for potential abuse and neglect in the United States. Family housing insecurity contributes risk for maltreatment among one in five of these children. A federal initiative connects inadequately housed families with long-term rental subsidies to reduce risk for separation; however, the program remains underutilized with funding to serve a fraction of eligible families. Using systems thinking and simulation modeling, the present study informs decision-making on scale-up of housing services.

Methods: A system dynamics model simulates the delivery of housing services for families involved with the child welfare system. Calibrated on national data, the model tests the impact of expanded housing services on child welfare outcomes, as well as return on investment.

Results: A series of simulated policy experiments demonstrate small improvements in keeping families together associated with dramatic expansion of housing services. Estimates suggest limited return on investments in the absence of improvements to the timeliness of service delivery.

Conclusions: Current housing services fail to scale sustainably within child welfare. Improvements must focus on timely connections to housing supports.