



THE UNITED STATES' LEADING EVIDENCE- BASED APPROACH TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS

An Examination of Housing First

Abstract

This paper examines the federal government's use of evidence-informed decision making by evaluating the evidence used to develop its Housing First (HF) policy approach to addressing homelessness. It also provides the reader an overview of the extent of our Nation's homelessness, identify the key factors that lead to someone experiencing loss of housing, and also present leading evidence supporting the use of HF as an effective way to end homelessness. Finally, a set of recommendations on how the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development can strengthen its HF's impact will be provided.

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Homelessness plagues every country. Social scientists, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, defined social issues riddled with complexities that also have an array of possible solutions and causes as “wicked problems” (Stony Brook University, 2020). While factors contributing to how someone loses their housing vary among areas and different populations, homelessness is a complex issue anywhere its found. This paper will present an overview of the state of homelessness within the United States, as well as a summary of what’s considered to be the key factors leading to homelessness, as we understand it in America today. We will learn of the progress both federal and local governments have made towards the goal of ending this epidemic within recent years, yet also the dilemmas they continue to face as they try to tackle this wicked problem.

The Federal agency, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), has been charged with coordinating the nation’s response to homelessness. USICH, an independent federal agency of the Executive branch, is comprised of 20 Federal agencies, such as the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Education. The reader will learn of the agency’s most recent strategy and various principles USICH agencies have committed themselves and their stakeholders to. Yet, our examination will center on the government’s leading evidence-based approach, the Housing First policy (HF). HF is the approach that places housing at the first priority to addressing the various needs of the homeless. As the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) highlights, HF “thus ends their homelessness and serving as a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life” without requiring the homeless to address other co-occurring issues, such as unemployment or substance abuse (NAEH, April 20, 2016). The examination of HF will include in depth analysis of the evidence behind the U.S. this approach and how HF

based programs, such as rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing is addressing housing instability throughout the country. Utilizing evidence of the effect of HF and HUD's current performance-based metrics, this paper will provide recommendations on the agency can enhance HF success by further defining and expanding upon how the approach is measured within CoC communities.

The leading homelessness advocacy agency, The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) (2019), compiled an interactive website allowing policy makers, students, and concerns citizens to access to years of data examining how homelessness is impacted by renewed efforts established by the federal government and localities. This website illustrates the progress in which homelessness in the U.S. has fallen in various ways, yet remain far from being ended. For example, NAEH states 552,830 people were homelessness on a given night in 2018, representing an increase of .03% since 2017 but an over 15% decrease since 2007 (NAEH, 2019). According to the Council of Economic Advisors with the Office of the President of the United States, 35% of those counted in 2018 who were homelessness were found to be unsheltered and sleeping in places not meant for human habitations, such as cars, vacant building, under bridges, etc. (Executive Office of the President of the United States, September 2019).

Yet, stating the total amount of persons who are homeless doesn't quite tell us who actually is experiencing homelessness, which is crucial to selecting the best approaches to address their needs. Data shows that over half of homeless persons are individuals, with 70% being men. However, this still doesn't provide a clear image of the key populations living without steady housing. For example, while the majority of homeless persons across the U.S. are white single males, NAEH highlights 33% are families with children and African American and

American Indians over represented based on our country's demographics. Even though NAEH and other advocacy agencies highlight that homelessness has decreased since 2007, NAEH stresses that this progress overshadows development of specific subgroups experiencing homelessness. For instance, the most positively impacted subgroup are homeless veterans with a 38% decrease and families with a 23% decrease since 2007. Those who are chronically homeless, which HUD defines as someone who has been homeless for at least a year or multiple times through a specific timeframe and who also have a disability, experienced a 19% decreased in homelessness (NAEH, 2019). As we evaluate the impact of homelessness, geographically, we see a concentration of homelessness on the coasts of our nation. According to the Council of Economic Advisers, California has almost half of the U.S.'s unsheltered population and New York City is one of a few east coast states that have highest shelter rate (Executive Office of the President of the United States, September 2019, p. 1).

As stated earlier, there are varying views on what leads to homelessness. However, according to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (2015) the reasons for homelessness are rooted in the "insufficient income and lack of affordable housing". They continue to write that in the annual survey of the U.S. Conference of Mayors identified the following top reasons that lead to people experiencing homelessness, "(1) lack of affordable housing, (2) unemployment, (3) poverty, and (4) low wages, in that order" (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2015). While most advocates and politicians within the homelessness and housing sector believe housing is a crucial part of alleviating homelessness, there are differing opinions on how to solve this public problem. For example, the Trump Administration believe that overpriced housing has been created by the "overregulation of housing markets" and if we are to tackle the housing crisis in America we must "deregulate" and

apply cities with tight markets to build more freely (p.2). The report continues to list other causes the administration believes leads to homelessness, such as warmer climate, an oversupply of quality shelters, and an array of personal issues such as substance abuse, disabilities, are low-income, formerly incarcerated, etc (p. 22).

Regardless of differing views as to what causes homelessness, the U.S. has done much work to identify approaches to addressing this social ailment. In 2018, USICH released their strategic plan entitled, “Home, Together: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness” (2018). This plan details how these agencies will work towards ensuring homelessness is “rare”, “brief”, and a “one-time experience” (p. 10) by focusing efforts on areas such as increasing affordable housing stock, diversion practices, helping people who exit homelessness find gainful employment, addressing the needs of unsheltered persons, etc (p.4). USICH’s role is to work with various stakeholders to identify the best evidence-based policy (EBP) and design a 5-year plan that partners across its agencies will work to implement. While this strategy provides details as to how agencies will target resources, the foundation of USICH’s entire strategy is based on HF, which is encapsulated in how the report calls all federal agencies and partners to join the work to build a “home together” for this population (p. 5).

Originally introduced during the President George W. Bush administration, HF has been implemented through USICH since the mid-1990s. The EBP movement has gained much traction since the Bush administration, yet there are differing views on what types of evidence and in what form should be sufficient to determine an approach as “evidence-based”. A key controversy in the EBP movement is “what constitutes evidence” and whether evidence should come from multiple sources, such as experimental research and/or expert experience, before being determined valid (Shillabeer et al, 2015, p. 3). In Deborah K. Padgett et al’s book,

“Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives” the writers argue that qualitative research can, and should, also be used to address the outcomes of HF, instead of only quantitative data. The writers argue that qualitative data uses the voices of those who are directly affected by homelessness and can provide a different perspective to evaluating potential outcomes of HF programs, as many earlier large-scale quantitative research projects accomplished. In USICH’s “The Evidence Behind Approaches That Drive an End to Homelessness”, the agency illustrates it uses a multiple source approach to determining what supports HF. For example, it lists as array of experimental research, case studies, and “voices from people who have experienced homelessness” (USICH, 2019, p.1).

USICH’s (2019) states evidence behind HF shows the negative impact homelessness and overall housing instability has on individuals and communities as a whole. Research shows when people lose their housing, employment is affected, health and family ties are broken (p.1). Additionally, HUD conducted the “Family Options Study” which found permanent housing helped to “[reduce] food insecurity and school mobility and improving adult and child wellbeing and long-term housing stability” (USICH, 2019, p. 4). While HF is the umbrella term for the approach, USICH and stakeholders have adopted this policy and designed other target evidence-based approaches: (1) prioritizing the homeless for existing housing or housing projects under construction; (2) rapidly rehousing the homeless by helping them identify housing, providing rental assistance, and support services and; (3) building permanent supportive housing to those with the “most intense needs” (p. 7). For example, evidence supporting rapid rehousing programs cites major cost-savings and favorable outcomes compared to emergency shelter costs and higher rates of placement into housing among veteran families (NAEH, 2019, p. 5). Additional studies, cited by USICH (2019), highlight major cost savings, across housing,

hospital, and emergency shelter systems, for HF approached that provide permanent supportive housing to our most vulnerable homeless populations, coupled with decreased Medicaid costs.

While cost savings and housing placement are leading outcomes of the evidence USICH has presented to support HF, what's significantly lacking from this research is a causal relationship between support services and housing outcomes. For example, all three of the HF approaches USICH highlights: housing stability, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing, state how integral support services are to housing the homeless. However, the research provided misses how these support services contributed to, or potentially inhibited, outcomes. Another related shortcoming of USICH's presented research is the length of each study. The agency's report is based on a 3-year large-scale study and fails to report on longer term housing stability. The limited timeframe for evaluation also presents itself in the performance metrics established by HUD, the nation's leading housing agency and member of USICH. For example, of the twelve (12) metrics HUD requires all homelessness grantees to track, three (3) focus on the rate at which people return to homelessness between 6 months to 2 year after being placed in housing (HUD, 2015, p. 2). Yet, is 2-3 years sufficient enough time to determine housing stability? It seems more consideration should be put into how stability should be measured and defined.

Additionally, most of the agency's measurements focus on whether the person or persons were housed; none seem to evaluate the quality of support services or establish a causal relationship. If USICH and its members are committed to establish a sustainable plan to prevent and end homelessness, the impact of support services on program performance should be tracked. The type of data that can be collected here can be the amount of times clients engaged in services, as well as what types of services they received. This can then be compared against their

housing outcomes. For example, are clients who engage in weekly counseling session more likely to find gainful employment to become self-sufficient? Or does the amount of times a client declines services determine how successful they will be when finally housed? Both policymakers and program directors could use the outcome of these studies to indicate whether services impact housing stability. Additionally, with performance metrics focused on a 6 month to three-year window and research studies focusing on the same timeframe, it would be beneficial for agencies to track longer periods of client outcomes. It is unclear as to why 2-3 years is a defined length of time to evaluate the rate of returns to homelessness.

In conclusion, the federal government's plan to prevent and end homelessness is steeped in EBP. Since the mid-90's, public administrators have diligently worked to transform the homelessness field to adhere to a housing first model, leading more people directly to stable housing than ever before. However, as research has shown, supportive housing must be equipped with adequate services for vulnerable populations to access. Additionally, more thoughtful consideration should be made into the most efficient way to define and measure housing stability. Yet, one of USICH's leading member agencies, HUD, doesn't include measurements that can adequately evaluate whether or not services impact outcomes and returns to homelessness aren't tracked beyond a two0year timeframe. Support services are key characteristic of HF. Therefore, the quality of services and whether it impacts housing outcomes should be thoroughly examined.

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