



Fact Sheet

What Research Says About Homelessness Prevention Programs

Summary: Homelessness prevention is typically provided through one-time cash assistance coupled with case management services and a connection to a legal services provider where appropriate. While prevention can be effective at reducing homelessness, it is difficult to target these services only to the people that truly need them because homelessness is statistically a rare outcome, even among people living in poverty. Predictive models and empirically validated screening tools that ask about known risk factors could help target these programs more effectively and research has found that even the highest-risk individuals and families benefit from these one-time assistance programs. Finally, to be effective, prevention programs must respond to emerging crises rapidly, often within a matter of days.

Key Research Insights on Prevention:

1. Homelessness prevention programs involve short-term or one-time assistance

The goal of homelessness prevention programs is to reduce the number of people experiencing literal homelessness (often defined as people entering shelter or other homelessness services). Programs seek to stabilize a client's housing through a combination of short-term direct services (e.g., case management and legal assistance) and, if needed, limited and one-time financial assistance (e.g., rental assistance, utility arrears). Financial assistance is paid to a landlord or other third party and usually ranges in amounts from \$1,000 to \$5,000. Typically, potential clients identify themselves as being at risk of homelessness by contacting a local service provider (e.g., Los Angeles and New York City) or by calling a hotline number to be screened into the program (e.g., Chicago and San Diego).

2. Homelessness prevention programs can reduce inflows into homelessness but they are difficult to target.

In Los Angeles, more than one million individuals are living in poverty and enrolled in public services, but each year only 1% of those individuals will become homeless. For public agencies and service providers, it can be very difficult to distinguish between who will become homeless and who will not. Prevention research (including studies conducted in LA County by the California Policy Lab (CPL), as well as studies conducted in Chicago and New York)¹ suggests that homelessness prevention programs work. For example, in Los Angeles, post-prevention homelessness rates were very different for households who received financial assistance compared to those that did not: Only 5.3% of households who received financial assistance

¹ *Evaluation of LA County Measure H-Funded Homelessness Prevention Strategies*, California Policy Lab (December 3, 2019), available at <https://homeless.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/cpl.prevention.011020.pdf>; Rolston, H., Geyer, J., Locke, G., Metraux, S., & Treglia, D. (2013). Evaluation of Homebase community prevention program. *Final Report, Abt Associates Inc, June, 6, 2013*; Evans, W. N., Sullivan, J. X., & Wallskog, M. (2016). The impact of homelessness prevention programs on homelessness. *Science*, 353(6300), 694-699.

subsequently became homeless within 12 months, while 19.9% of households who enrolled in prevention services but only received case management (and no financial assistance) became homeless within 12 months.

The key to expanding public investments in these programs is to ensure that limited resources are reaching people who would otherwise become homeless if they did not receive this help.

3. Predictive models and empirically validated screening tools can help target prevention programs.

CPL's research on homelessness prevention has been focused on how to target homelessness prevention programs effectively. We are exploring both predictive models and evidence-based screening tools.

(a) Predictive models: In one set of projects, CPL is applying data science techniques to predict who among current LA County service clients are at highest risk of becoming homeless. These predictive models take a proactive approach by analyzing service data linked across eight county agencies to identify clients of county agencies who are at the highest risk of becoming homeless within the next twelve months. As further detailed in a recent CPL research report, *Predicting and Preventing Homelessness in Los Angeles*², key findings from this research include:

- The 3,000 people identified by the models as being at highest risk of first-time homelessness are 48 times more likely to experience first-time homelessness than average county clients.
- The majority of single adults who will experience first-time homelessness or a return to homelessness are already clients of mainstream LA County agencies, which presents opportunities for proactive intervention.
- The models suggest that sharp spikes in service use, increasingly frequent service use, and the receipt of multiple services from a single agency are all warning signs that someone living in deep poverty is at high risk for homelessness.

(b) Tools to screen prevention clients who self-identify as being at risk of homelessness: Cities and counties throughout California have programs for people who self-identify as at-risk of homelessness. These individuals and families face sudden shocks like job loss or death or illness of a family member and seek assistance from prevention service providers. As the effects of the pandemic continue and eviction stays are lifted, more Californians will likely seek prevention services to help them avoid homelessness when faced with economic, medical, and housing crises. Because prevention programs cannot serve everyone who comes through their doors, providers use screening questionnaires to determine which families are at the highest risk of homelessness and could benefit the most from prevention services. (Predictive models that rely on administrative data from public agencies would not be able to predict risk for many of these people who face sudden crises because they may not already have records with public agencies when they seek help for the first time.) In Los

² California Policy Lab & U. of Chicago Urban Labs. "Predicting and Preventing Homelessness in LA County." Sept. 2019. Retrieved from https://www.capolicylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Predicting_and_Preventing_Homelessness_in_Los_Angeles.pdf.

Angeles, providers use a screening questionnaire called the “Prevention Targeting Tool” to evaluate each person’s eligibility for prevention services. CPL analyzed the tool and found that it could be shortened and reweighted to more accurately predict risk of future homelessness. CPL also found that, of the risk factors on the current Prevention Targeting Tool, the risk factors below appear to be most important in predicting who amongst people who self-identify as at-risk of homelessness are at highest risk of homelessness:

- Paying out of pocket to stay in a hotel but no longer being able to sustain the unit due to increased hotel costs or decreased income
- Receiving an unlawful detainer lawsuit or notice to vacate a rental unit
- Being doubled-up (*i.e.*, staying with family or friends) and subsequently being told by the lease holder to vacate the unit
- Current involvement with Adult Protective Services or Child Protective Services
- Head of Household under age 25
- Recently experiencing a major household event (death of family member, separation or divorce from adult partner, birth of a new child)

4. Prevention programs need to respond to rapid-evolving personal crises and should strive to minimize the administrative burden on providers.

Most people who self-identify as being at risk of homelessness face imminent loss of housing and unexpected events that affect their income or expenses. They need to be screened and provided with legal referrals, rental assistance, and other critical support within a very short timeframe. Service providers charged with screening and providing assistance face ever-increasing caseloads, limited time, and finite resources. Prevention programs should be designed to ease provider burdens so that they can quickly connect the highest-risk people with the resources they need to avoid homelessness. Centralizing intake, screening, referrals and disbursement of cash assistance may help reduce administrative burden.

5. Further research is needed to inform the design and implementation of homelessness prevention programs. Below are high priority research questions:

- More research is needed to develop an empirically valid survey that accurately predicts risk of homelessness and thus helps service providers determine who should receive cash assistance.
- Predictive analytics can be used to proactively reach out to individuals and families who do not self-identify as at risk of homelessness. Researchers and policy makers should work together to design pilots that would connect those at highest risk of homelessness with services and assistance to prevent them from falling into homelessness.
- Along with ensuring that the prevention resources go to those who are most in need, it is also important to test what types of prevention programs and services are the most effective. As prevention programs are piloted and implemented, policymakers should work with researchers to identify ways to test the effectiveness of the programs.

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