POLICY BRIEF

Homelessness Prevention in Los Angeles County

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ISSUE

Homelessness in the United States is a major public health and humanitarian crisis. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there were over 554,000 Americans experiencing homelessness in 2017. Of this population, approximately 192,875 people were unsheltered. And though overall homelessness has declined nationally since 2008, unsheltered homelessness is on the rise. In all, HUD estimates that 2 million people experience homelessness at some point in any given year.

Despite the national decreasing trend in homelessness, California remains on the front lines of the crisis. On any given night in California in 2018, 129,972 people are homeless. Of these, 52,765 are residents of Los Angeles County. First-time homelessness in Los Angeles County is increasing: In 2018, 9,205 Angelenos experienced homelessness for the first time, an increase in the annual incidence of first-time homelessness by 1,161 persons. Structural causes such as inadequate wages and a constrained supply of affordable housing exacerbate the problem and complicate solutions.

This project evaluates the county's current homelessness prevention efforts spearheaded by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), called the Prevention and Diversion Program.

APPROACH

The researchers examined the county's prevention program using three data sources. First, they canvassed the literature on homelessness prevention, as well as the leading case studies analyzing existing prevention efforts. They relied on case studies from Chicago and New York to refine analyses of effective prevention strategies and predictors of homelessness.

Second, they conducted primary research through interviews with a representative sample of service providers, including the leading case studies on prevention efforts. A summary of prevention efforts in Chicago and New York City further refines the analysis of effective prevention strategies and predictors of homelessness.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) should clearly define its target population, which requires rigorously evaluating prevention program screening tool questions for their predictive power and testing other risk factors for their external validity.

- LAHSA should determine which prevention services and what allocations of resources effectively prevent homelessness by using a counterfactual of prevention participants to determine what is actually working for participant outcomes.

- LAHSA should add data fields for its non-financial or short-term prevention services, and require documentation when participants receive non-financial services so as to track the effectiveness of these interventions.

Finally, they analyzed administrative datasets from LAHSA's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), including the demographic characteristics and services administered to prevention participants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

More prevention clients end up in permanent housing than do all enrollees in LAHSA services because enrollees to other programs are often already homelessness while prevention program enrollees are not.

- Eighty-five percent of the prevention population exits into permanent housing, compared to 27 percent of the overall population.

- The majority of prevention participants exit into permanent housing without a subsidy.

- A much smaller proportion of prevention participants exit into transitional or interim housing than in the general population.

- Only 2 percent of prevention enrollees exit to homelessness, compared with 8 percent of all enrollees.

In terms of recidivism, the researchers observed that 22 percent of single adults and 16 percent of families who were enrolled and received prevention services return for homelessness services within one year.

In regards to program targeting, overall administration, funding levels for providers, and client data collection, some findings include:

- Many providers implement independent internal enrollment eligibility criteria to prioritize who they serve with their limited funding. Four providers had run out of funding halfway through the fiscal year, and five more expected to do so.

- Service providers reported how the prevention program screening tool is administered can change a household's score. Six providers explained that

Figure 1. **Length of service for families**
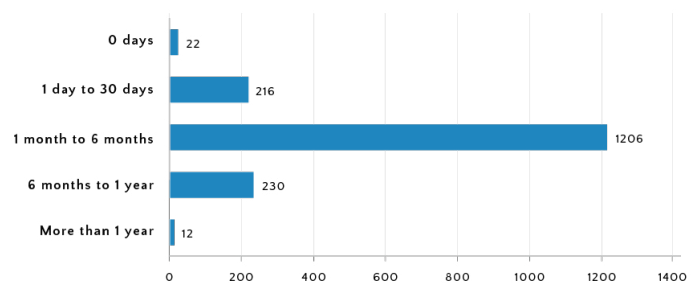
they had to spend longer administering the tool when "digging into" an applicant's history and that answers could easily be "massaged."

- LAHSA does not require providers to track the provision on non-financial services in HMIS.

- There is no way to track participants' outcomes beyond specifying whether the household is residing in a unit rented or owned by the participant.

- The current service provider area funding allocation is based on a point-in-time homeless count and does not accurately meet the geographic need for prevention services.

CONCLUSIONS

- LAHSA must test the predictive power of the prevention program screening tool to determine what indicators are predictive of homelessness for the population being served in Los Angeles County.

- LAHSA should locate trustworthy community partners who are better able to reach vulnerable communities that are unlikely to access government services, and who would very likely become homeless without a prevention program intervention.

- In the short term, LAHSA could create a rainy-day fund for service providers to access once they run out of prevention funding.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Schroer, E., De Laveaga, T., Solis, G., & Gamboa, R. (2019). Homelessness prevention in Los Angeles County. (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/2019-capstone_group_homelessness-prevention/