

Finding Home

Policy Options for Addressing
Homelessness in Canada

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 E-book

Chapter 1.3

One in Five...Housing as a Factor in the Admission of Children to Care

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The Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST) is mandated to protect children under the age of sixteen in the community under Ontario's Child and Family Services Act. It is the largest board-operated child welfare organization in North America and has been serving children and families for more than 100 years.

CAST has a legal responsibility to protect children at risk of abuse and/or neglect. One form of intervention involves removing children from their parent's home and providing substitute care.

A child comes into substitute care of a child welfare agency by one of two methods. Under a voluntary agreement, the parents agree to temporarily place a child into CAST's care. Otherwise, the children are placed in CAST's care through an apprehension by the Family Division of Provincial Court.

Apprehensions occur when there is serious and immediate danger to a child's well-being. The decision to place a child in care is made on the basis of input from a variety of professional assessments by commu-

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nity and child welfare workers. The assessment is coordinated by family service workers.

Family service workers are professional social workers who visit families in their home as a routine practice, and have first-hand information of a family's housing circumstances. Therefore, these social workers are particularly knowledgeable about the major factors affecting the families and children they work with.

This report summarizes the findings of a research project designed to determine the extent to which housing is a factor in the decision to place children in care and the decision to return them to their homes.

The survey asked family service workers two key questions and several follow-up questions about the housing conditions of CAST clients:

- In your opinion, was the family's housing situation one of the factors that resulted in admission of a child or children into care?
- In your opinion, was there any delay of the return home of the child from care due to housing-related problems?

This research replicates a study carried out in 1992 (Cohen-Schlanger et al., 1995), the results of which were widely reported and discussed. In its May 1993 report on Canada, for example, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Geneva referred to the 1992 study: "Paragraph 14. The Committee received information from non-governmental organizations about families being forced to relinquish their children to foster care because of inability to provide adequate housing or other necessities." The Committee asked Canada to explain why this was occurring and made recommendations to encourage progress on this issue.

The questionnaires provided opportunities for respondents to write in additional comments. Researchers also conducted a follow-up interview with some of the family service workers.

A premise of this research is that access to adequate and affordable housing will not necessarily prevent child admissions to care. However, adequate housing may: (a) reduce the number of admissions by stabilizing families' living situations in ways that promote children's well-being; and (b) reduce the delay in the return of children to their homes because of housing problems.

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This study raises the broader question that no one study on its own can answer: Could the incidence of child abuse and neglect be reduced if more families had access to affordable, adequate, and appropriate housing? This is a critical question for all child welfare organizations, all levels of government, and the community in general.

Research method

The design of this project was similar to the 1992 study (Cohen Schlanger et al., 1995). All family service workers employed by CAST were asked to complete a questionnaire on two of their case files. The CAST's Executive Director gave approval to carry out the study using the proposed method and the University of Toronto's ethics review office also approved the method. CAST's staff researcher reviewed the questionnaire and helped address practical issues such as obtaining an appropriate sample and maintaining confidentiality. The draft questionnaire and proposed method was circulated to a number of housing and child welfare experts for comment. The questionnaire was pretested and modifications were made as a result.

A case file is opened for every child who is admitted to care. To ensure that there was no selection bias by the family service workers, the two case files for each worker were selected on a random basis by the research team. The aim of this process was to achieve a sample that would accurately represent the population of children admitted to care. The random selection process was adjusted to avoid selection of more than one child per family.

The sample was selected from children's case files that were open from September to December 2000 (a few months before the questionnaires were distributed). About 950 case files were open in each of these months, and, adjusting for continuing cases, a total in-care sample of 1,331 distinct cases was obtained. A randomized selection of two cases for each family service worker resulted in a final sample of 271 cases. This is a 32% increase in sample size from the 1992 study.

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Response rate

Allowing for vacations, illness, and turnover among family service workers, a good response rate was obtained. At the time of the study there were 128 family service workers at the agency, of which 106 returned the questionnaires (an 83% participation rate). Of the 271 questionnaires distributed, 191 were returned (70%).

In the 1992 study, 108 family service workers were surveyed, and 69 returned their completed questionnaires (a 63.8% participation rate). Of the 205 children's cases in the total sample, questionnaires were returned for 128 (62.4%).

This relatively high response rate and the random sampling technique allows us to be confident that the findings from this sample can be generalized to other CAST admissions of children to care.

Sample characteristics

The characteristics of the families and children in the random sample are summarized in Table 1. There was an increase in the admissions of children to care through apprehensions: 74% of the cases in 2000 involved apprehensions versus 68% of the cases in 1992. Apprehensions involve the most serious cases, in which a child is deemed to face an immediate risk of abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

Table 1. Comparison of 1992 and 2000 Sample Characteristics

	1992	2000
Children from single-parent families	68%	74%
Estimated monthly family income (median)	\$1,225	\$1,500
Families receiving welfare/family benefits	70%	56%
Families receiving unemployment insurance	5%	1.6%
Families living in public housing (MTHA)	23%	30%
Median age of the child placed into care	6.5 yrs old	11 yrs old
The child's gender	53% M 47% F	48% M 52% F

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Survey findings

(A) Housing as a factor in admissions to care

In one out of five cases (20.7%) the family's housing situation was a factor that resulted in temporary placement of a child into care. This is a significant increase from the 18.4% in the 1992 study.

According to Ontario's Child and Family Services Act, inadequate housing or housing problems are not sufficient grounds to consider a child in need of protection. Even homelessness, in the absence of other concerns, is not sufficient legal grounds for placement of a child into CAST care. Social workers use community services such as shelters and legal clinics to deal with housing problems and homelessness.

Within these legal restrictions, it is significant that the family service workers identified 20.7% of their child admissions as cases in which they considered housing a factor in the decision to place the child in care. This represents 39 cases out of 191. Of these 39 cases, 10 cases (25.6%) were admitted by voluntary agreement and 29 cases (74.4%) cases involved apprehensions. These percentages are similar to those in the 1992 study.

In this study, the ratio between the number of apprehensions compared to voluntary agreements is higher in cases in which housing is a factor. Housing was a factor in 26% of the voluntary agreement cases, and a factor in 74% of apprehensions. This is in contrast to the total admissions to care in our survey (whether or not housing was a factor), where 32% were voluntary agreements and 68% were apprehensions.

This finding suggests that where housing is a factor, there is greater risk of the abuse or neglect of a child. In many of the cases in which housing was a factor, the family service workers had serious concerns about the child's welfare, including the risk of physical abuse, emotional abuse, or abandonment. This substantiates other findings in the literature that link the family housing situation with child welfare (Trocmé et al., 1994; Courtney et al., 2004).

(B) An affordable, safe, and appropriate family housing situation

In 8.6% of the cases, families "did not have housing that would be affordable now," and in 20.1% of the cases families did not have housing

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considered “safe and appropriate to meet their physical housing needs.” Compared to the 1992 study, these results indicate an increase in housing problems. Family service workers were asked to assess whether the family had affordable, safe, and appropriate housing. These two questions were asked of all the cases, not just the 21% of cases in which housing was known to be a factor. In 29% of the cases, families “did not have housing that would be affordable now” (compared to 23% in 1992), and in 21% of the cases, families did not have housing considered “safe and appropriate to meet their physical housing needs” (compared to 14% in 1992). Compared to the 1992 study, therefore, these results indicate an increase in housing problems related to affordability and to the safety of the child. These results indicate some potential for further admissions to care if the affordability problem worsens for the family or if the safety or appropriateness (e.g., overcrowding) of the family’s home deteriorates.

(C) Housing situation a factor in delaying the return home

In 11.5% of the cases, the return home of a child from care was delayed due to a housing-related problem (an increase from 8.6% in the 1992 study). Family service workers were asked if there was any delay in returning the child to the family because of housing-related problems. Whether or not housing is a factor in the initial decision to place a child in care, the family may subsequently develop a severe housing problem. CAST will postpone the return of a child until an assessment is made that the family has secured adequate housing.

Out of the 134 responses to this question, family service workers reported that they had delayed the return home of a child due to housing-related problems in 11.5% of cases. This is a significant increase from the 8.6% of the cases reported in the 1992 study. In the cases in which the return was delayed, the respondent was asked to estimate the length of the delay in months. The delay was reported for 14 out of 15 cases. Compared to the 1992 study, the length of the delay is three times as long.

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Table 2. Reported Delay of a Child Due to Housing-Related Problems

Delay	No. of cases
1 month	1
3 months	2
5 months	1
6 months	1
12 months	3
More than 12 months	6

(D) Nature of the housing problem when there is a delay in return home

In the 11.5% of these cases (n=15) in which the return home was delayed due to housing-related factors, family service workers were asked about the nature of the housing problem. More than one answer was possible. The two most common reasons noted by workers were “No permanent housing for the family” and “Inadequate income.”

Table 3. Nature of the Housing Factors, 2000

<i>In cases where the family's housing situation was a factor in keeping the child in care (n=15 in 2000)</i>	Important or very important
No permanent home for the family	75%
Inadequate income	73%
Inadequate health standards	71%
Inadequate amount of living space	67%
No affordable housing for the family	67%
No first and last months' rent	54%

Conclusion and discussion

This survey indicates that Toronto's housing situation is having a detrimental effect on the well-being of many families with children. The situation was worse in 2000 than it was in 1992. The families and children who are clients of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto are among the most economically disadvantaged in Ontario. They face substantial obstacles to obtaining adequate and appropriate housing, and for some this affects their ability to care for their children.

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The finding that in 20.7% of the cases surveyed the family's housing situation was one of the factors that resulted in the temporary placement of a child or children into care indicates how serious the situation is for many families. This is a significant increase since the 1992 survey. Given that there were 2,250 CAST cases during 2000, this finding means that about 450 children were in care that year at least partly because of their families' housing situation.

The financial cost of a child in care is very high, averaging about \$40,761 per child. (This figure is based on the CAST estimate for an average month in care of \$1,941 per month per child, and 21 months as the average length of time in care, during 2000.) This means that the cases in which housing was a factor in the admission assessment cost about \$18 million a year.

This survey also found that housing problems are delaying the return of children to their families in 11.5% of cases. This is a significant increase from the 8.6% reported in the 1992 survey. During 2000, housing factors delayed the return of children to their families in about 250 cases. Even a one-month delay for the 250 cases is very expensive, costing CAST almost \$500,000 (that is, \$1,941 per month per child).

Assessing the financial costs of child admissions to care does not include the social and emotional costs, both short and long-term, of a child being placed in out-of-home care. Placement in out-of-home care is an intervention of last resort for CAST because extensive research has demonstrated the negative consequences of removing children from their parents.

The method and scope of this survey is too limited to state more precisely the degree to which housing was a factor and the precise nature of the housing factors involved. The aim was to identify the extent to which housing is a factor in child admissions to care. Although this study cannot state that housing-related factors caused the admissions of children to care, the family service workers identify housing as a factor in one out of five of their cases during 2000. Clearly, there is a significant connection between a family's housing situation and child admissions into care.

The finding further suggests that a significant proportion of CAST's budget for in-care cost is associated with the inability of some families in

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Toronto to obtain adequate housing. Addressing the housing needs of low-income families may be important in reducing child admissions and in facilitating a quicker return of children to their families.

Access to safe and affordable housing will not necessarily prevent child admissions to CAST care, but housing support may reduce the number of admissions, stabilize the family's living situation in ways that promote children's well-being, and reduce housing-related delays in the return of children to their homes. Unfortunately, this study demonstrates that progress on this front has not been made in the eight years since the 1992 study.

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