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When housing hardship is read as neglect: A social work argument for a housing lens

Christian Castro

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ABSTRACT

Housing instability can create conditions that child-welfare systems must take seriously while also making poverty-related hardship look like parental indifference. This essay argues for a housing lens: assess immediate safety precisely, distinguish a resource deficit from a caregiving decision, and pair accountability with concrete support. Research on supportive housing suggests that housing intervention can improve stability, reduce removals, and support reunification.

Keywords: housing instability, child welfare, neglect, supportive housing, family preservation

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Origin in my MSW journey

This essay grew from a 2026 child-welfare policy fact sheet and related MSW work on housing instability. The original assignment was expanded into a public analysis, its claims were rechecked, and classroom language was replaced with jurisdiction-neutral language. No family case or client record is included.

A family can be behind on rent, doubled up, moving between relatives, living in a motel, or staying in a shelter without appearing in the narrowest count of homelessness. In each setting, ordinary caregiving becomes harder. Sleep is interrupted. School transportation changes. Food storage may be limited. Appointments are missed because the family is solving the next twenty-four hours.

Those conditions can create real risks for children. They can also create a dangerous interpretive shortcut: hardship becomes evidence of a parent's character. Social work must hold two truths together. Children need safety, and families need systems capable of distinguishing danger from deprivation.

A housing lens does not minimize safety. It asks what is producing the risk and which response can actually reduce it.

Housing instability is more than literal homelessness

Precarious housing includes eviction risk, frequent moves, overcrowding, unsafe conditions, and informal doubling up. These experiences are not interchangeable, but each can disrupt the routines on which family stability depends. Chapin Hall's review of housing and child-welfare involvement identifies several pathways: inadequate housing can create health or safety concerns; homelessness can intensify parental stress or mental-health and substance-use problems; and families in shelters may face increased scrutiny.

That last pathway matters. Administrative data show who is reported, investigated, or removed; they do not show every similarly situated family. A family's visibility to schools, shelters, hospitals, or benefit systems can change the probability that hardship becomes a report. This does not mean reports are unnecessary. It means surveillance is not distributed evenly and should not be confused with a complete measure of harm.

The assessment question must become more precise

"Is this neglect?" can be too blunt as an opening question. A better assessment asks: What specific condition threatens the child? What did the caregiver know and have the practical ability to do? What safe alternatives were actually available? Would emergency rent, utilities, child care, transportation, repairs, or temporary placement with kin materially reduce the concern?

Legal definitions vary by jurisdiction, and mandated reporters must follow applicable law and agency policy. A housing lens does not replace those duties. It improves the factual work beneath them. It prevents "the home is unsafe" from becoming the end of the analysis when the next question should be "What would make it safe, and who has the power to provide it?"

Concrete support is a child-safety intervention

Eviction prevention, legal assistance, flexible funds, rapid rehousing, and supportive housing are often placed outside the category of clinical or child-welfare intervention. That separation is artificial when housing is producing the safety concern. Chapin Hall's 2026 review of strategies to prevent unnecessary child-welfare involvement among Black families identifies housing assistance, income supports, flexible funds, child care, and other concrete supports as part of the prevention evidence base.

Supportive housing combines a housing subsidy with services suited to the family's needs. In a randomized Connecticut demonstration involving child-welfare-involved families with significant housing instability, supportive-housing groups experienced approximately 20-30% fewer child removals and about 20% higher reunification than business as usual over the study period, at a similar cost. Those findings should not be generalized beyond their design, but they challenge the assumption that surveillance is the only serious response to housing-linked risk.

A 2025 evaluation of San Francisco's Bringing Families Home program adds practice-based evidence. Families who remained engaged experienced improved residential stability and family functioning; most families exiting the program were stably housed, and many with closed out-of-home cases reunified. The study was not the same design as the Connecticut trial, so it answers a different question. Together, the findings support further investment and evaluation rather than a promise that housing alone resolves every concern.

Accountability should track systems as well as parents

Families are often given deadlines: attend the appointment, complete the plan, keep the unit, arrive for the visit. A prevention system should measure its own performance with the same seriousness. How many days passed before rent assistance was available? Was the service offered in the family's language? Could a parent reach it by transit? Did the program accept families with the relevant record, disability, household size, or immigration circumstances? Was there a safe place for the child while the parent attended?

When a family is labeled "noncompliant" after encountering a closed waitlist, inaccessible office, or unaffordable requirement, the record can transform a system barrier into an individual failure. Closed-loop documentation should record the barrier and the agency's response, not merely whether the parent completed the task.

What a housing-lens response can look like

1. **Name the immediate safety condition.** Avoid global labels when a specific concern can be described.
2. **Clarify housing status broadly.** Ask about eviction, doubling up, utilities, habitability, overcrowding, transportation, and likely moves.
3. **Identify the caregiver's available options.** Separate unwillingness from options that are unsafe, inaccessible, or nonexistent.

4. **Provide concrete help early.** Use flexible funding, legal aid, housing navigation, kin supports, and cross-system advocacy before crisis compounds.
5. **Keep safety planning active.** Material support and careful monitoring can occur together.
6. **Document the system's actions.** Record referrals, waitlists, denials, accommodations, and unresolved gaps.

A different kind of rigor

It is possible to romanticize neither families nor systems. Some cases involve serious harm. Some housing conditions remain unsafe despite assistance. Substance use, domestic violence, health needs, and housing instability can interact. A housing lens does not decide the case in advance. It refuses to let poverty do the deciding.

The deeper lesson from my MSW work is that social work assessment should locate responsibility accurately. Parents are responsible for caregiving decisions within the choices available to them. Institutions are responsible for whether meaningful choices exist. Child safety improves when the intervention addresses both.

References and further reading

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Educational policy analysis. Child-welfare definitions, reporting duties, and procedures vary by jurisdiction; consult current law, agency policy, and supervision.

Publication note

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