

What Helps People Stay Housed After Housing Assistance?

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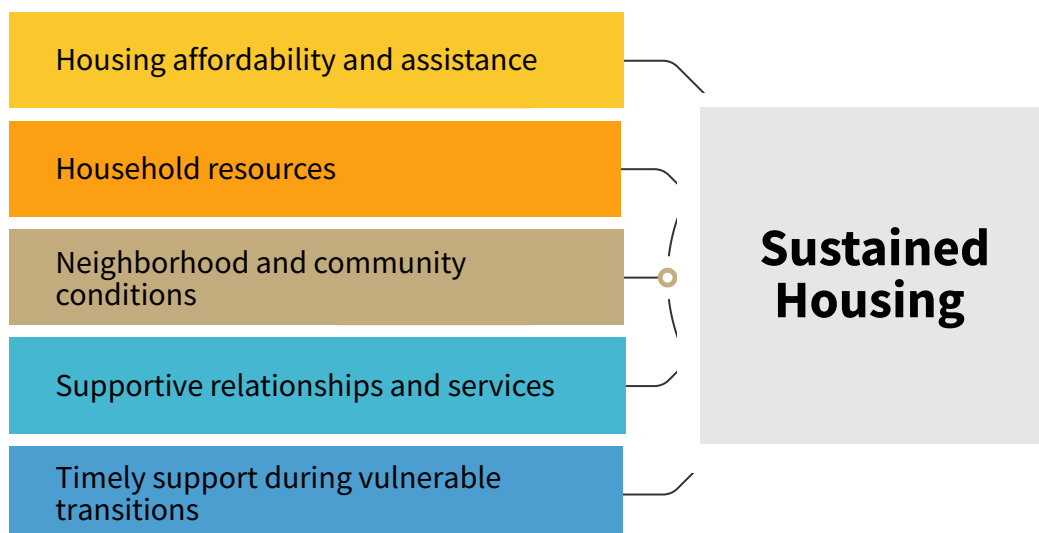
Helping families or individuals move into housing is not the same as ensuring that the housing remains stable.

Someone can avoid a shelter return yet still experience repeated moves, doubling up, severe rent burden, or continued risk of losing housing. This distinction is visible in the United States: in one Housing and Urban Development (HUD) demonstration, only 10% of families returned to homelessness within 12 months after the demonstration ended, but 76% moved at least once during that same year.¹ In supplemental analyses, researchers found that more than 25% of families who used rapid re-housing returned to homelessness during the 12 months after rental assistance ended.²

Together, these studies show why **“no shelter return” is an incomplete measure** of durable stability and highlight the need to identify factors that contribute to successful housing even after temporary housing assistance.

What’s the bottom line?

Sustained housing is not explained by one household characteristic, service, or program, but many factors. The strongest causal evidence is around making housing more affordable. Housing and case-management interventions can also improve stability, but the evidence varies by population, model, and implementation.



What does the research support?

Evidence: Strongly supported

Making housing affordable, particularly through long-term rental subsidies for families experiencing homelessness, substantially improves housing stability. Housing-plus-support interventions can improve housing outcomes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Evidence: Consistent/ promising

Social and caseworker support, transition-focused interventions such as Critical Time Intervention (CTI), and rapid access to help during periods of instability are associated with better outcomes, although effects vary by population and model.

Evidence: Still uncertain

Which combination, intensity, and duration of post-assistance supports is most effective for different households; how best to identify households that will need renewed help; which local measures best capture stability rather than absence of shelter re-entry.

Factors associated with sustained housing are multi-level.

A systematic review of 38 studies identified factors associated with tenancy sustainment after homelessness.³ The review grouped determinants into four interacting levels—individual, interpersonal, community, and structural.

Four levels of determinants of tenancy sustainment



Individual

E.g., Demographics (age, gender); mental health status; sense of control



Interpersonal

E.g., Social support, support workers



Community

E.g., Community and neighborhood factors



Structural

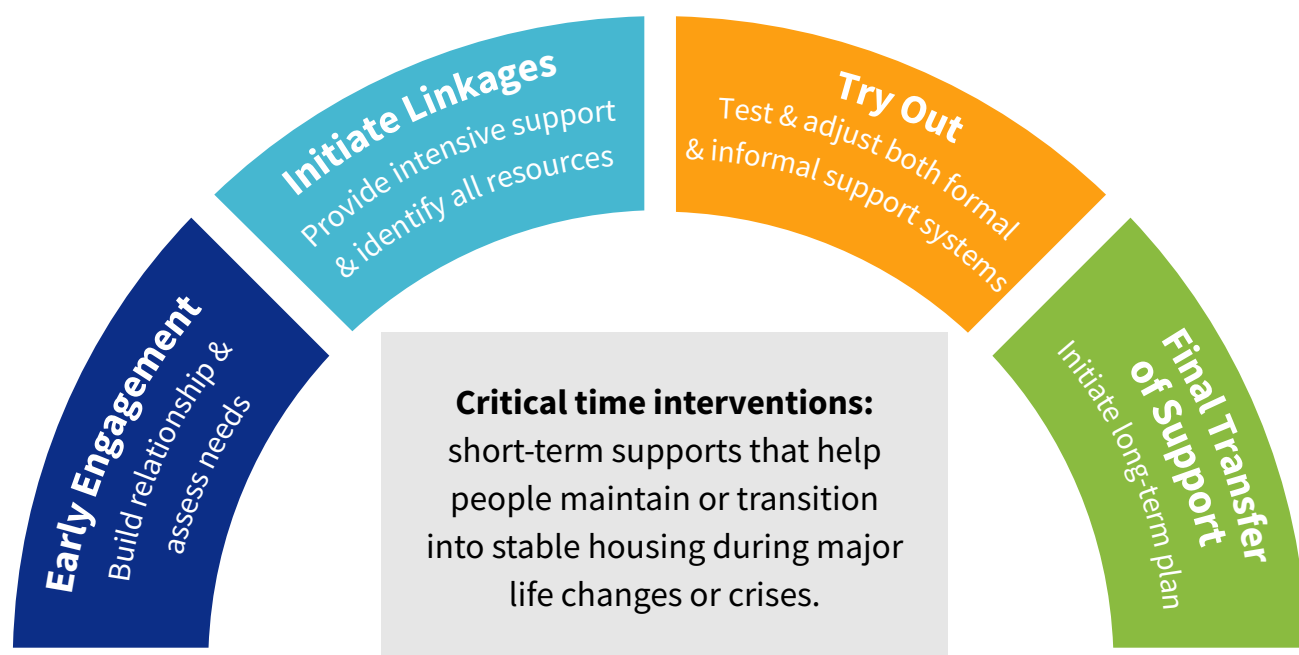
E.g., State support, interventions

Participation in programs such as Housing First and receipt of social support from family members and support workers were among the more consistent positive factors, though it is challenging to draw strong conclusions due to the heterogeneity of studies. Twenty-two studies were from the United States; many involved adults with mental illness or substance-use problems, and nine examined Housing First.

The transition out of assistance deserves particular attention.

HUD's supplemental Family Options analysis found that returns to homelessness were **concentrated in the months immediately after rapid re-housing assistance ended**, while baseline family characteristics did little to identify who would later return.⁶

This is consistent with Critical Time Intervention (CTI), a time-limited model built around vulnerable transitions. A 2023 systematic review of 13 CTI studies found consistent positive effects on reduced homelessness and service engagement.⁷



Support matters, but “case management” is not one uniform intervention.

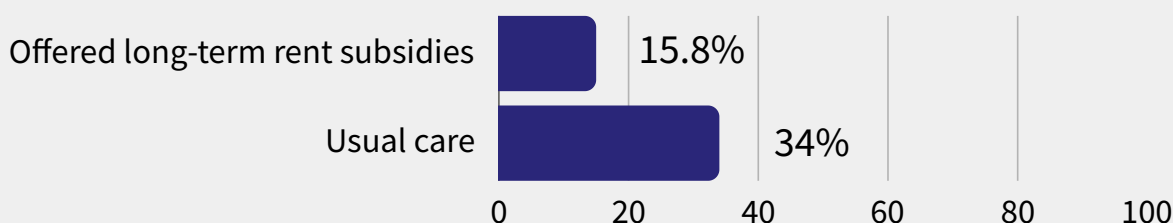
Systematic reviews find that case-management approaches can improve housing outcomes, but effects differ by intensity, population, and implementation.⁸ The tenancy-sustainment review also found positive associations with support-worker contact, rapport, and strong working relationships.³ For practice, the important question is not only whether case management exists, but when it is offered, how intensive it is, whether it continues through transitions, and whether it connects households to concrete housing and income resources.

Housing affordability and ongoing rental assistance have shown evidence of effectiveness

In a randomized controlled trial of 2,282 formerly homeless families in the Family Options Study,⁴ the 37-month follow-up showed that:

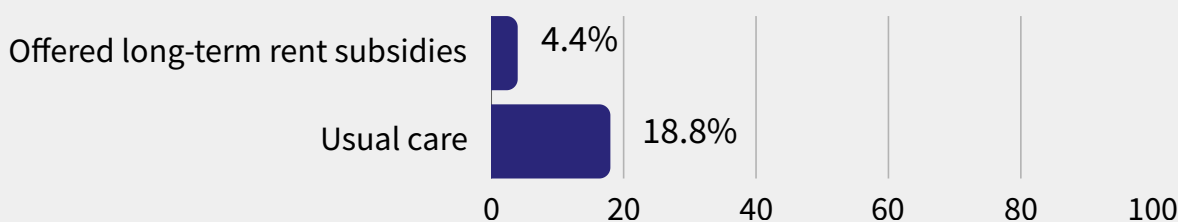
15.8% of families offered long-term rent subsidies had experienced homelessness or doubling up in the previous six months, compared with 34.0% of families receiving usual care.

Families experienced homelessness or doubling up in the previous six months



4.4% of families offered long-term rent subsidies used emergency shelters versus 18.8% of families receiving usual care.

Families using emergency shelters



Short-term assistance strategies show mixed evidence.

In the same study, short-term rent subsidies did not improve its housing-stability outcomes relative to usual care at 20 or 37 months.⁴ However, a 2026 analysis of Los Angeles County administrative data found that rapid re-housing participants who leased up with a subsidy used homeless services less frequently over a four-year period than similar participants who enrolled but did not lease up—about 30% less for individuals and 25% less for families.⁵

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Methods

Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as a review of research and findings from non-partisan think tanks, foundations, and organizations. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal statistical methods for summarizing results and exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

Notes and Limitations

A major evidence limitation is measurement. Studies variously define success as being housed at a point in time, days housed, absence of shelter use, length of tenancy, or number of moves. The tenancy-sustainment review concluded that the concept is poorly and inconsistently measured. For local systems, “did not return to shelter” should therefore not be treated as synonymous with “stably housed.”

This draft prioritized systematic reviews and meta-analyses, peer-reviewed U.S. studies, and major HUD research directly relevant to tenancy sustainment, housing stability, and outcomes after housing assistance. Because the literature spans different populations and definitions of stability, findings are synthesized by strength and consistency rather than treated as estimates from one uniform intervention.

References

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