

Insights from a Research Convening:

Key Questions in Homelessness Prevention

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Addressing homelessness requires not only rehousing people who are already unhoused but also preventing as many entries into homelessness as possible. Over the past decade, homelessness prevention has evolved from a few early initiatives into an expanding set of programs, including cash assistance, case management, and shelter diversion.* Research focused on homelessness prevention has also expanded, with studies examining homelessness inflows, program targeting, program impacts, and other topics.

Recognizing that many important conversations about homelessness prevention research have been happening informally — at the edges of conferences, across one-on-one partnerships, and within individual research centers and policy labs — the Government Performance Lab, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, organized a convening to bring these discussions together and foster collaboration across the field.

The Homelessness Prevention Research Convening, held on May 12-13, 2026, gathered 39 participants, mostly professors and researchers based at academic institutions, along with a small number of data-focused practitioners and technical assistance and evaluation providers. Participants discussed what the evidence says about what works to prevent homelessness as well as the field's most pressing research gaps.

This publication summarizes participants' discussions on five interconnected areas where participants saw the greatest need for additional research:

- Improving **targeting in homelessness prevention programs**
- Deepening understanding of **pathways into homelessness**
- Clarifying the relationship between **eviction and homelessness**
- Identifying approaches to support **households living in doubled-up situations**
- Assessing the **impacts of different types of interventions**

The purpose of this publication is to help researchers identify high-priority questions and to guide funders toward research investments that are likely to improve prevention efforts. We acknowledge that some of the questions listed below are or may be the focus of ongoing research; we include them here to make them visible and to encourage further exploration. This publication is not intended as a comprehensive research agenda, but we hope the conversations held at the convening will help move the field forward.

* There are many definitions of homelessness prevention. At the convening, we took a broad view of prevention that mirrors the diverse programming that communities are implementing to prevent entries into homelessness. This includes programming that prevents homelessness right before it happens (e.g., shelter diversion), to more upstream programming (e.g., eviction prevention).

Targeting in Homelessness Prevention Programs

Participants discussed that research on targeting is particularly important because the population that is vulnerably housed is very large and the vast majority of those people do not become homeless. Participants also discussed several questions that future research could address to improve targeting efficiency while ensuring accessibility and feasibility.

- **Combining existing approaches:** Participants identified two primary approaches to targeting within homelessness prevention. In some jurisdictions, households must first self-identify as needing assistance; providers then assess their eligibility using structured screening tools. In Los Angeles, the county uses a predictive model that analyzes administrative data to proactively identify households at high risk of homelessness and guide targeted outreach efforts. How might integrating the two existing approaches improve the balance between accuracy, accessibility, equity, and feasibility in targeting? For example, predictive models could help prioritize among screened households or steer outreach efforts toward groups of people that may be less likely to seek help.
- **Streamlining predictive modeling:** How can predictive models be designed to operate using fewer or more readily available data sources, while still performing well? What level of model complexity is feasible given providers' operational capacity and their ability to coordinate data exchanges with other agencies?
- **Enhancing screening across systems and populations:** What additional opportunities are there to embed homelessness risk screening in other systems or strengthen existing processes — for example, prisons, emergency rooms, maternity wards, and schools? What adaptations are needed to optimize screening for specific populations, such as older adults who may have a different set of risk factors associated with first-time homelessness?
- **Identifying key predictors across contexts:** What are the risk factors that most accurately predict homelessness across jurisdictions, and under what conditions are particular risk factors most salient? Is it possible to pinpoint a set of predictors that all or most jurisdictions could use as a starting point for their screening tools to strengthen their targeting efficiency?
- **Leveraging information on social ties:** How can screening tools better assess social ties, and how can this information be used to improve identification of households at risk of homelessness and shape prevention response? Participants noted that social connection can be an important protective factor as many people who later enter homelessness first stay “doubled up” with friends or family.

Participants also underscored implementation issues that cut across targeting approaches. Services that require people to come forward and self-identify as needing assistance may underserve groups that are less likely to seek help. Likewise, using administrative data for predictive modeling may miss people who are not well represented in public databases, such as undocumented households. Even among those identified as eligible, many people do not ultimately receive services because they decline assistance or cannot complete documentation requirements. Participants viewed understanding and addressing these issues as essential to improving targeting and enrollment effectiveness.

2 Pathways Into Homelessness

Participants considered several directions for research about who is entering homelessness, from where, and how prevention systems might intervene more effectively, particularly upstream, to prevent homelessness.

- **Differentiating populations and their needs:** How can better differentiation among the various populations at risk of homelessness, such as older adults and households with and without earning potential, be used to identify the specific services and supports most relevant for each group? At what point do the added costs of tailored targeting and programming efforts outweigh the benefits relative to more generic alternatives?
- **Fully utilizing available data:** How might new or underutilized data sources be used to learn more about who is becoming homeless and why? For example, what can be gained from linking homelessness data to census data, leveraging “single point of entry” systems such as Detroit’s Housing HelpLine, using address history and other data from commercial providers to examine housing stability, or making targeted adjustments to Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data collection to capture more information about prior living situations and system touch points?
- **Studying substance use and mental health:** How can substance use and mental health challenges be measured more consistently and earlier in people’s trajectories to allow for stronger inferences about their role in pathways into homelessness? When, how, and for whom do substance use and mental health challenges increase homelessness risk, and what types of prevention responses are most appropriate in different circumstances?
- **Stemming inflows through institutions outside the traditional homelessness response system:** Institutions such as schools, healthcare systems, and prisons often engage people at high risk of homelessness before they appear in the homelessness response system. What additional opportunities are there to identify at-risk people and provide prevention services through these institutions to stem entries into homelessness? What kinds of partnerships, data-sharing arrangements, and organizational capacity are needed to make this feasible?

Eviction and Homelessness

Participants highlighted the need for a clearer understanding of the relationship between eviction and homelessness, including causality, timing, and implications. They discussed several directions for further research.

- **Understanding the timing and broader household impacts of evictions:** How much time typically elapses between an eviction and a homelessness episode, and how does this timing differ across populations? Given that not all household members are necessarily named on an eviction filing, how can data sources such as census records and credit data be used to better capture the full impact of eviction on everyone in the household?
- **Measuring the full effects of preventing an eviction:** Beyond potential avoided entries into homelessness, what are the broader consequences of preventing an eviction on health, school attendance, employment, and other outcomes? How can studies more fully quantify these benefits and any associated cost savings in downstream response systems?
- **Assessing upstream, lower-cost strategies:** What role can interventions that occur earlier in the eviction process, such as tenant education, “know your rights” campaigns, and other forms of advocacy, play in reducing entries into homelessness? Are these strategies more cost effective and easier to scale than full legal representation?
- **Interventions with landlords:** What strategies can be used to identify landlords who have high eviction filing rates and to intervene to lower those rates? How can landlords be engaged collaboratively, including through mediation, to support housing stability?
- **Improving targeting within eviction prevention:** How can eviction prevention targeting better identify which cases are most likely to result in homelessness without intervention? What evidence is most needed to guide the allocation of limited eviction prevention resources?
- **Addressing informal evictions:** How can informal evictions that do not appear in court records be better identified and measured?
- **Preventing default judgments[†]:** What approaches to reduce default judgments in formal eviction proceedings are most effective? (E.g., virtual hearing options or behavioral nudges such as reminder texts.)

[†] In formal eviction proceedings, a default judgment is a court decision issued in favor of one party — usually the landlord — because the other party — usually the tenant — failed to appear in court or respond to the case by the required deadline.

Doubled-Up Households

Participants identified households living in “doubled-up” situations, that is, households sharing the housing of family, friends, or others because of loss of housing or economic hardship, as a critical group to understand in order to inform homelessness prevention efforts and discussed several unanswered questions.

- **Quantifying doubled-up households:** How can researchers more accurately quantify how many households are doubled up? Participants noted existing efforts to estimate doubled-up households using census microdata and highlighted opportunities to use administrative data and new surveys designed for this purpose.[‡]
- **Differentiating among doubled-up situations:** What are the most common types of doubled-up situations? When is a doubled-up situation a useful, temporary bridge into stable housing, when is it the best medium- to long-term housing option to avoid literal homelessness, and when is it at high risk of leading to literal homelessness? What are the best screening approaches to identify the various types of doubled-up situations, including their stability and safety, and the resource needs to either maintain or move on from that housing arrangement?
- **Identifying services and resources that can stabilize doubled-up households:** What services and resources are most effective at stabilizing doubled-up situations? (E.g., mediation, small payments to leaseholders, and assistance to secure furniture or bunk beds.) Can levers outside the homelessness prevention system, such as tax credits and changes in benefits that recognize additional household members or allow households to combine vouchers, help stabilize doubled-up situations or support transitions from them?
- **Attending to equity implications:** How do risks and resources associated with doubling up differ across racial and ethnic groups? How can this information be used to design more equitable interventions to stabilize or support transitions out of doubled-up situations?

[‡] For example, participants mentioned the McKinney-Vento Act, which requires schools to collect data on students who are homeless. Students living in doubled-up situations are considered homeless for McKinney-Vento reporting purposes, so this data could be used to learn more about doubled-up households with school-aged children. Participants also suggested exploring whether Medicaid or other healthcare data could provide insight into households with no school-aged children.

Impacts of Interventions

Participants discussed gaps in evidence about the specific services and resources that most effectively prevent homelessness, for whom, and under what conditions. While evaluations of specific interventions are becoming more common, participants agreed that there is still much to learn. Participants also emphasized that greater conceptual clarity when studying these interventions would make it easier to build the evidence base and to replicate and scale up promising models.

- **Distinguishing between who self-resolves and who needs services:** Which households at risk of becoming homeless are likely to stabilize without formal assistance, and which require targeted services or financial support to avoid homelessness? How could insights on self-resolution and service needs be used to fine-tune targeting and help communities use limited resources more effectively?
- **Measuring and understanding impact duration:** How long do the effects of prevention interventions last? Early evidence indicates that the effects of some interventions extend for at least a year, but additional studies are needed to understand more about how long these effects persist and for whom.
- **Measuring impacts on additional outcomes:** How can studies assess impacts beyond homelessness, such as health, education, or employment, while avoiding unfocused, exploratory analysis? Participants saw value in research that selects additional outcome domains based on plausible theories of change.
- **Understanding case management:** What activities and structures characterize effective case management in homelessness prevention, and what intensity and duration are most helpful? What impact can case management have with and without financial assistance, and which specific case manager practices and characteristics produce better outcomes?
- **Advancing research on financial assistance:** What is the optimal size, timing, and structure of financial assistance payments for preventing homelessness? What new financial tools might be effective, such as rental insurance products or partial payments to landlords, and what forms of financial coaching or case management should accompany financial assistance?
- **Clarifying diversion and problem-solving:** What do diversion and housing-focused problem-solving entail in practice, and through what mechanisms are these approaches expected to reduce homelessness? What are the impacts of these approaches on homelessness and other outcomes?
- **Exploring the role of workforce development:** How can job training, job search assistance, and placement services contribute to homelessness prevention, and which populations at risk of homelessness benefit most from workforce interventions? What does an effective “warm handoff” between homelessness prevention programs and workforce systems look like in practice?

Conclusion

This brief highlights five interconnected areas where further research can support efforts to build a comprehensive and effective homelessness prevention system. Answering these questions will require continued collaboration and dialogue among researchers, practitioners, funders, and government agencies at all levels. We hope this brief helps sharpen priorities and spark further conversations and partnerships to strengthen homelessness prevention.

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The [Government Performance Lab](#), housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are also able to provide experiential learning.

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