How can we support people in social housing to gain and maintain employment? An Evidence Check

Snapshot

- An Evidence Check was undertaken to identify the best ways to support social housing tenants to gain and maintain employment.

- The findings offer direction to organisations considering the design of employment programs for young adults in social housing.

- Employment programs targeted at social housing tenants and people who receive social housing assistance appear to have potential individual economic and wellbeing benefits.

- Programs that include several different support services, including on-site support, case management, and mentoring, appear to be more effective. Programs that include social support and financial incentives also appear to be effective.

- There are, however, significant gaps in the evidence. Further evidence on the elements that make up successful employment programs is needed.

Introduction

Employment participation and economic independence are important aspects of wellbeing. In 2018, we commissioned an Evidence Check to identify the best ways to support social housing tenants to gain and maintain employment.

This Evidence to Action Note outlines some key findings and issues from the Evidence Check. These are reported in detail in ['Supporting people in social housing gain and maintain employment: an Evidence Check'.](#)

Q What is an Evidence Check?

An Evidence Check is a synthesis, summary and analysis of the best and most relevant research evidence to inform policy and program design.

Why is it important to support people in social housing to gain and maintain employment?

In Australia, young people and adults living in social housing have markedly low employment rates.[1] Employment is critically important to an individual's wellbeing. It significantly contributes to their living standards and quality of life, through the development of skills and knowledge, income, sense of purpose and social engagement.[1] Adequate and stable housing is also central to wellbeing[2], and is key to securing social and employment outcomes.[3]

Supporting people to have a stable place to live, and to find and maintain employment, is a key focus of the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) in applying the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework.

What did the Evidence Check find?

The Evidence Check identified 22 program evaluations that were concerned with helping social housing tenants find and retain employment. With only a small number of rigorous evaluations, a central or shared conclusion was difficult to identify. However, a number of key findings were made and are summarised on page three.

Gaps in the evidence

Significant gaps were identified in the Evidence Check, including:

- The socioeconomic, demographic and individual characteristics associated with success or failure of employment programs are vague and underexplored.

- Studies tend to focus on the success of the program overall, rather than the specific aspects of the program that might lead to success. As such, there are gaps in understanding which components of the program contribute the most to positive participant outcomes.

- There is very little evidence of the impact of social housing and employment programs on long-term outcomes.

✓ What works

What models/programs have been effective in improving access to and sustaining employment?

- Provision of employment related services[4], such as job search help, referrals to education programs and vocational training, child care and transportation assistance
- Rent-based work incentives[4]
- Activities to promote mutual support for work in neighbourhoods[4]
- Case management combined with rent subsidy sanctions[5]
- Dedicated community office for work-focused interviews, advisor meetings and action planning[6]
- Housing advice programs that also include an element of training or employment advice may have positive employment effects[7]
- An intensive classroom-based family support program that sought to educate social housing tenants about home ownership was found to have significant positive effects on participants' propensity to move into private rented accommodation, become home owners and/or increase earnings[8]

✗ What to avoid

- Programs that fail to address social barriers to work participation, such as low levels of education or caring responsibilities[9]
- Case management support only[5]
- Partnership arrangements – linking of job service providers, training and educational institutions, neighbourhood centres and employers[10]

ⓘ What helps

What key elements, program components, activities etc. contributed to the model's effectiveness?

- Complete and timely implementation of programs
- Job search and finding services[11]
- Efforts to generate and sustain community buy-in[12]
- Acquiring new skills and training are associated with success in transitioning to self-sufficiency[8, 13]
- Disengagement from unsupportive people can be an important factor in people moving towards self-sufficiency[9]
- Financial disincentives are effective in persuading program participants to engage with employment programs[5]
- Interventions that are catered to local conditions[6]
- An individualised work activation program with one-on-one relationships between advisors and participants[6]
- Bonus payments for participants who move into and retain work[6]
- Defining and targeting eligible populations and the services provided[7]
- Back-to-employment programs linked to social housing are more likely to be effective when a range of services are provided, including work-focused training, on-site employment services, personal advisors/mentors, financial incentives and guarantees of follow-on employment[14]
- Intensive case management support may help address additional barriers to employment (e.g. caring responsibilities, low levels of education)[15]

Where to from here?

This Evidence Check offers some direction to policy and program officers designing employment programs for social housing clients. The evidence review revealed that assistance into employment programs can be wide ranging and may include help with searching for work, referrals to training or education, and referrals to support services including childcare and counselling. DCJ staff could use this evidence to identify programs that have been successful in improving access to and sustaining employment for social housing clients.

Further primary research is needed to provide robust evidence on the key ingredients for the success of employment programs. Past evaluations typically focused on assessing the success of programs overall, rather than examining which aspects of the programs were most influential in assisting participants to find and maintain work.

This is an important lesson for DCJ. When conducting or commissioning evaluations we need to ensure they assess the importance of specific program features, the circumstances in which they succeed, and the characteristics of clients that might be important.

More Information

Evidence Check: Supporting people in social housing gain and maintain employment

The Evidence Check was brokered by the Sax Institute for the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, now the Department of Communities and Justice, and published in March 2018. The Evidence Check was prepared by Chris Leishman, Andreas Cebulla and Kirstie Petrou.

Future Directions

- The Evidence Check seeks to ensure programs developed under Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW are informed by the highest quality and most up-to-date evidence available.

- Future Directions sets out the NSW Government's vision for social housing over a 10-year period from 2016, and concerns housing quality and supply; tenant experience; and opportunities for people to avoid entry to, and transition out of, social housing.

Endnotes

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2 ASIB (Australian Social Inclusion Board) 2012, *Social inclusion in Australia: how Australia is faring*, 2nd edn, ASIB, Canberra.

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