Furnishings, Mental Health, and Homelessness Recurrence

Homelessness Recurrence After Housing Placement

Providing housing to people experiencing homelessness greatly improves their stability, but **a significant minority eventually fall back into homelessness**. National data show that about **one-quarter of families who exit homelessness are at high risk of becoming homeless again** [1] . In one case study in Utah, a major shelter reported that around **30% of previously housed families returned to the shelter** even under a "Housing First" approach [2] . These returns often stem from complex, interrelated factors – for example, loss of income or employment, unresolved health or **mental health issues**, relapse into substance use, or the **collapse of social support networks** (e.g. family conflicts or domestic violence trauma) [3] [4] . In other words, simply obtaining housing is not always enough; **underlying challenges** can undermine housing stability if not addressed. This is why many programs emphasize **supportive housing**, which pairs affordable housing with services like mental health care, addiction treatment, and case management **to help individuals remain housed** [5] .

The Role of Furnished vs. Unfurnished Homes

One often overlooked factor in housing stability is whether the new housing is **adequately furnished**. When people move from homelessness into an empty or sparsely furnished house, they face what advocates call "**furniture poverty**" – lacking basics like a bed, table, chairs, or a couch. As one Canadian furniture bank bluntly states, **"Empty housing is not a home"** [6] . Living in an empty, unfurnished space can be **cold, uncomfortable, and demoralizing**, especially for families with children (imagine eating meals on milk crates or sleeping on a pile of clothes) [7] [8] . In fact, **lack of furniture has been identified as a key reason some people do not sustain their tenancies** and end up returning to shelters [9] . Without furnishings, a "house" may never feel like a livable, stable home – it remains a shell that can worsen stress and isolation. Agencies have found that **"furniture poverty has devastating effects on mental and physical health, and often results in people returning to crisis"** (i.e. falling back into homelessness) [6] . By contrast, helping newly housed individuals **furnish their homes can significantly improve their stability** and reduce the likelihood of a return to homelessness [6] [9] .

Impact of Furnishings on Mental Health and Well-Being

A growing body of research and practice experience shows that **having a furnished home greatly benefits mental health and overall well-being** for people transitioning out of homelessness. For example, a recent **qualitative study in Detroit** interviewed individuals who had lived in unfurnished housing after homelessness; once they received furniture, participants reported dramatic improvements. The study found that **receiving furniture helped people form an emotional attachment to their new home ("place attachment") and measurably** improved their overall quality of life [10] **. Other research and program evaluations echo these findings: having furniture and household essentials** enhances physical, mental,

and social health, **helps people feel "normal" again, and even aids in achieving personal goals** [11] . **Participants commonly report that after furnishing their home they have** fewer aches and pains (e.g. from no longer sleeping on the floor) and markedly reduced stress, anxiety, and depression levels [11] . **In one program, clients described finally feeling rested, secure, and "**like they have a new beginning**" once their home was furnished** [12] [13] **. Research compiled by a furniture assistance nonprofit likewise noted that** providing essential furnishings has a "considerable positive impact on mental health, financial security, and social wellbeing," and it increases tenancy sustainability **(people stay housed longer instead of "bouncing" out)** [14] **. In short, helping someone turn bare housing into a** comfortable, personalized home relieves a huge mental strain**. It removes the daily stress of living in austerity (no bed, no table, etc.) and replaces it with a sense of comfort, dignity, and hope.

Quantitative data back up these qualitative insights. In a 2023 follow-up survey by a housing support organization, **91% of recently housed families reported feeling more stable in their home after receiving furniture** [15] . About **80% said their household now felt healthier – citing better sleep, fewer aches, improved mood and less stress – once they had beds and other basics** [15] . Nearly **90% reported that with furniture in place, they could focus on other personal or financial goals** rather than worrying about basic household needs [16] . Importantly, **91% said they felt more comfortable or at peace at home**, and **76% even felt safer** in their living space, after it was furnished [15] . These improvements in mental state and comfort can be critical for someone recovering from the trauma of homelessness. They no longer feel like they're "camping" in an empty apartment; instead, their unit becomes a true refuge. As one mother who fled domestic violence explained after furnishing her apartment, "It... **helps calm down the stress...helps you pull your mind together**, especially when you've got kids. It's something that you can say, 'okay, I got that part done'...that's a huge thing" [17] . Relieving that mental burden allows individuals to concentrate on employment, health, and other steps needed to maintain housing stability [18] .

Family Cohesion and Social Benefits of a Furnished Home

For **families** emerging from homelessness, furnishings can profoundly affect their ability to "gel" as a family in the new home. Basic furniture helps re-establish routines and a sense of normal family life. For instance, **children who have their own beds and a table for meals experience a more stable, nurturing environment**, which can improve their well-being and behavior. In the survey mentioned above, **73% of parents said their interactions with their children improved after receiving furniture**, and 69% reported **their children's health or well-being improved** as well [19] . Parents no longer have to worry about kids sleeping on the floor or doing homework sitting on a milk crate, which **reduces parental stress and guilt**. One single mother described how excited her kids were to come home from school and see actual beds to sleep in – it was "amazing" and immediately made their new house feel like a **real home for the family** [20] [21] . Having a furnished living room and kitchen also enables families to **eat together at a table and spend time together comfortably**, strengthening family bonds that may have been strained during the homeless period.

Moreover, a furnished home fosters **social inclusion** beyond the immediate family. People are **far more likely to invite friends or extended family over when they have furniture** and feel proud of their home. In fact, 80% of newly housed individuals in one program said they were **now more likely to have visitors** once their home was furnished [22] . This helps rebuild social networks and reduces the isolation that formerly homeless people often feel. By contrast, if an apartment is empty or makeshift, people may feel ashamed or too uncomfortable to invite others, cutting them off socially. Thus, **furnishings help integrate people back into society** – they can host a friend for coffee or let their kids have a playdate, activities that

were virtually impossible while living in a shelter or on the street. These positive social experiences contribute to a sense of belonging and permanence, which in turn encourages families to **invest in keeping their housing**.

Reducing Returns to Homelessness through Support and Stability

In summary, **the transition from homelessness to stable housing succeeds best when housing is coupled with the supports that make a house a home** – both the tangible supports (furniture, household goods, financial assistance) and the intangible supports (mental health care, case management, community integration). Government-supported housing programs aiming to combat homelessness are increasingly aware of this. Many "Housing First" initiatives now partner with **furniture banks and donors to fully furnish units for participants**, recognizing that an **unfurnished home can jeopardize a tenancy**. This approach is grounded in evidence: when basic needs are met, families can focus on employment, education, and healing, rather than struggling to acquire a bed or a chair. As a UK campaign to end furniture poverty noted, **providing essential items to people in new housing is *transformational* – a relatively small investment that yields enormous social value by improving people's mental and physical well-being and stability** [14] . By reducing stress and creating a sense of normalcy, furnishings may also indirectly address some mental health challenges; a comfortable home can be a therapeutic environment for those recovering from trauma or mental illness.

Of course, **furnishing a home is not a silver bullet** if other serious issues remain unaddressed. People with severe mental illness or addiction may still struggle to retain housing without treatment, and many families need ongoing income support or counseling to truly thrive. Studies find that **economic factors (like affordable housing supply and income) are still primary determinants** of long-term housing stability [23] . The **most common reason people cite for losing housing is often financial (e.g. inability to pay rent)** [24] , not personal choice. That said, mental health and environmental factors are deeply intertwined with these economic challenges. When someone's **mental health deteriorates – potentially worsened by the stress of an uncomfortable living situation – they may be less able to cope with job or family responsibilities, leading to housing loss**. Conversely, when a person's **living environment is supportive and stress-relieving, their mental health and resilience tend to improve**, making them better equipped to handle other challenges. In practical terms, **outfitting homes for formerly homeless individuals removes one major source of stress and instability**, thereby *complementing* other supports like counseling or healthcare.

In conclusion, research and real-world program outcomes strongly suggest that **"making a house a home" is a crucial part of helping people stay housed**. A **furnished, livable home provides dignity, comfort, and stability**, which bolster mental health and family well-being. This, in turn, reduces the likelihood that people will abandon their housing or slip back into homelessness. Addressing the reasons people return to homelessness requires a holistic approach – tackling financial insecurity, mental health, and social support. Ensuring that **newly housed families have furniture and household essentials is an important** piece of that puzzle**, one that can reduce stress and give these families a solid foundation on which to rebuild their lives [14] [6] .

Sources

- Kim, K. & Garcia, I. (2019). *Why Do Homeless Families Exit and Return the Homeless Shelter?* IJERPH, 16(22):4328. (Salt Lake County case study on factors in family homelessness) [3] [1] [2] [5] .

- Furniture Bank (Canada). *What is Furniture Poverty?* (Charitable organization website) [6] [7] [8] .

- City of Winston-Salem, NC. *greeNest Operations Proposal* (local furniture bank program report, citing research) [11] [9] .

- A Wider Circle (2025). *A Hidden Crisis: Understanding and Addressing Furniture Poverty* (white paper) [20] [17] [14] [15] [19] .

---

[1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [23] Why Do Homeless Families Exit and Return the Homeless Shelter? Factors Affecting the Risk of Family Homelessness in Salt Lake County (Utah, United States) as a Case Study
https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/22/4328

[6] [7] [8] Furniture Poverty | Furniture Bank
https://www.furniturebank.org/furniture-poverty/

[9] [11] [12] [13] [18] cityofws.org
https://www.cityofws.org/DocumentCenter/View/27735/greeNest-Operations

[10] The impact of living in an un- or under-furnished house on ...
https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/jcop.22865

[14] [15] [16] [17] [19] [20] [21] [22] AWC Furniture Poverty Brief FINAL
https://awidercircle.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/AWC-Furniture-Poverty-Brief-FINAL.pdf

[24] [PDF] Federal Resources for Addressing Behavioral Health Needs of ...
https://www.usich.gov/sites/default/files/document/
Federal%20Resources%20for%20Addressing%20the%20Behavioral%20Health%20Needs%20of%20People%20Experiencing%20or%20at%20Risk%20of%2