

Housing First in Finland

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Finland's Housing First approach is often portrayed as an shining example to other European countries. Since 1987 the number of homeless people (which in the Finish definition includes those living temporarily with family or friends) has declined from more than 18,000 people to less than 5,000. When Finland first set a goal of eliminating homelessness in 1987, it applied the Staircase Model (see section 6.6.1 of the textbook), which initially led to a reduction of homelessness (Shinn & Khadduri, 2020). However, the progress started to stall in the mid-1990s which was attributed to a group of people with high support needs for whom the Staircase Model was not effective. In 2008 Finland started to adopt the Housing First Model. In the philosophy of this model a dwelling is *“not a reward that a homeless person receives once their life is back on track. Instead, a dwelling is the foundation on which the rest of life is put back together”* (Y-Foundation, 2017, p.10).

In line with the Housing First Model, shelters were converted into apartment units and dwellings were bought and constructed for homeless people. In Helsinki, the number of shelter and hostel beds shrunk from 2,121 in 1985 to 52 in 2016. During the same period, the number of independent rental apartments for (formerly) homeless people increased from 65 to 2,433, while the number of supported housing units rose from 127 to 1,309 (Y-Foundation, 2017).

The Finish approach is indebted to Pathways to Housing program which was developed in New York (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000), but deviates from it on a few crucial aspects (Shinn & Khadduri, 2020):

- Pathways to Housing focused on people with mental illnesses, while the Housing First Model in Finland (like in many other contexts) includes all categories of homelessness.
- Homeless people in Finland were not only allocated to scattered-site dwellings, but also to congregated supported housing projects. As congregated housing may lead to tensions with neighbours, the Finns have invested in programs to stimulate tenants to participate in their communities (e.g. by cleaning the environment).



- In Finland, there is less reliance on dedicated services than on ordinary community services, especially in the scattered-site apartments.

In 2012, the strategy of the Housing First approach was broadened. Next to the focus on ending long-term homelessness, there was a stronger focus on the prevention of homelessness by expanding housing advice services and other preventative services. Next to that, there was more attention for 'hidden' forms of homelessness, i.e. those living temporarily and insecurely with friends, acquaintances and family (Pleace, 2017)

The Finnish approach is very successful, witnessing the fact that the attrition rate (referring to those who do not exit of homelessness on a sustainable basis) is in the very low range of 5-10%. One of the success factors is the strong political consensus, in combination with the central coordination of Finland's Ministry of Environment, bundling together the efforts of local, regional and national authorities as well as NGOs. Another crucial factor was the expansion of affordable and adequate housing that offered permanent tenancies to the formerly homeless (Pleace, 2017; Shinn & Khadduri, 2020).

In the following video you can learn more about the Finnish approach. It is a Ted-talk of Juha Kaakinen from the Y-Foundation. The Y-Foundation is one of the key national developers of the Housing First principle in Finland. The foundation is active in 57 cities and municipalities in Finland and is with 18 thousand apartments the fourth largest landlord in Finland (see: <https://ysaatio.fi/en/y-foundation>).

[Housing First - a way towards ending homelessness | Juha Kaakinen | TEDxBratistlava - YouTube](#)

References

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Y-Foundation (2017) *A Home of Your Own: Housing First and Ending Homelessness in Finland*. Keuruu, Finland: Otava Book Printing Ltd. <https://ysaatio.fi/en/housing-first-finland/a-home-of-your-own-handbook>'.