

## Housing First

### Combatting Long-Term Homelessness in Finland

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#### A Finnish Twist to a Successful Model

This chapter focuses on the ambition to reduce long-term homelessness in Finland, and especially on the success story of this policy starting from 2007 onwards. Since then, the primary philosophy of combatting long-term homelessness has been based on the idea of Housing First ('HF' or 'the HF model'). Homelessness is a manifold phenomenon including, for example, arrangements where persons dwell in other people's homes due to lack of their own residence. Long-term homelessness is, however, understood more narrowly. According to the established Finnish definition, a long-term homeless person

has a significant social or a health problem, such as debt, substance abuse, or mental health problems, and whose homelessness has been prolonged or is in danger of being prolonged due to a lack of conventional housing solutions and appropriate support services. Homelessness is considered long-term if it has lasted for at least one year or if the individual has repeatedly experienced homelessness over the last three years. In cases of long-term homelessness, the emphasis is on the need for assistance and treatment—the length of time is of secondary importance. ([Homelessness in Finland 2020: Report 2021](#): 4)

The estimated number of long-term homeless people has decreased from approximately 3,500 to 1,000 between 2008 and 2020 ([Homelessness in Finland 2020: Report 2021](#): 9).

The origin of the idea of HF is commonly traced back to the 1990s, where the New York based organization 'Pathways to Housing' ('PH' or 'the PH model') pioneered it. The idea has since 'travelled' to Europe and has been internationally promoted as a successful initiative and evidence-based good practice in reducing unacceptable long-term, chronic homelessness. However, although the HF label has become a popular 'brand' among homelessness policymakers around the world, exact replications of the original PH model are rare ([Pleace et al. 2016](#): 430). Instead, HF services in different countries and contexts reflect the ideas, histories

and cultures of the services and people providing them, and thus total fidelity to the original PH is considered ‘neither necessary, nor indeed practical’ (Pleace and Bretherton 2013: 34). As we will show later in this chapter, the developers of the Finnish HF model have emphasized its unique formation process and features. According to the handbook *A Home of Your Own* (2017: 15) presenting the Finnish HF model, its principles are as follows:

1. *Housing enables independent lives.* The person who is homeless can go straight to living in a rental apartment without temporary arrangements. Health and social problems are addressed when housing is permanent and domestic peace is guaranteed. For some, the best model for independent living is an ordinary rental apartment, for others it is a supported housing unit where support is available around the clock.
2. *Respect of choice.* The client has the opportunity to choose from treatments and services. If the client does not want to completely give up intoxicants, they are not forced into doing so. Instead, a sufficient goal is to reduce the use of intoxicants and the harm caused by psychiatric symptoms so that the client will be able to live in their home. The services supporting recovery are constructed so that they respect the autonomy of the resident and strengthen their participation.
3. *Rehabilitation and empowerment of the resident.* Staff meet and treat the client as an equal. Interaction with the client aims at building trust and an atmosphere of communality, which help the client to rehabilitate and empower themselves on their own terms. The aim of dialogue and interaction is always to find solutions to the client’s situation together with them. This requires stripping away the employee’s position of power and adopting a new approach to work. The resident is consistently given positive feedback on even the smallest of everyday achievements.
4. *Integration into the community and society.* In Housing First work, the resident gets help to make their dwelling feel like a home. A home is a prerequisite for the resident being able to organise their own life and to feel involved in it and their environment. Having their own lease, for example, creates a feeling of permanence and thereby helps to feel connected to wider society. The resident is supported in keeping in contact with immediate networks such as their family. In supported housing units, systematic neighbourhood work is done with residents. (*A Home of Your Own* 2017: 15)

The Finnish HF model’s principles—its core philosophy’s emphasis on the meaning of and right to permanent housing, respect for client choice regarding both housing and services, harm reduction, empowerment and integration—strongly resemble other HF models implemented in Europe and North America (Pleace

et al. 2016: 431). The uniqueness of the Finnish HF model lies in how it was launched and how it has been implemented in practice since then.

In this chapter we demonstrate that HF policy in Finland performs well on all four assessment dimensions of the PPPE framework ((see Chapter 1, 'Introduction: Studying Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries' by de la Porte et al. in this volume), and cf. Compton and 't Hart 2019; Luetjens et al. 2019). In brief, it can be characterized as a *programmatic success* because the policy has real public value and beneficial social outcomes as it aims at ending long-term homelessness with a strategy based on the clear philosophy of change. Its *process success* is evident in the careful, innovative development work that created the base for the governmental programmes, integrating various stakeholders into the process, and providing adequate funding, administrative resources and realistic timelines. The marks of *political success* are that the HF model enjoys fairly large support in political parties, municipal administration and among grassroots professionals dealing with long-term homelessness and among homeless people themselves. Furthermore, the policy has *endured*: from its 2007 beginnings. It has been further developed and implemented consistently in governmental programmes in close collaboration with municipal level administration and grassroot-level actors.

We will describe the origins of this success and address possible signs of non-success of the Finnish HF model. We begin the story with the major turning point of the Finnish homelessness policy, and pay special attention to how it has been narrated and constructed in the research literature and policy papers. Following this, we concentrate on the contents of the four governmental programmes on homelessness (2008–2022). We then evaluate the level of success of the Finnish HF model and propose that depending on one's perspective, it can be assessed as either a full, resilient or conflicted success (cf. McConnell 2010).

## A Turning Point in Homelessness Policy

In contemporary Western societies, homelessness has become widely recognized as a social problem that needs to be tackled and solved. Reducing and ending homelessness have become governmental policy objectives, especially in the Nordic welfare states. Current commitments and approaches arose out of dissatisfaction and criticism with earlier ways to govern homelessness and observation of the great number of homeless people as unacceptable and inhuman. The history of combatting homelessness in Finland after the Second World War includes creating and increasing social housing production to safeguard affordable homes and building low-level emergency shelters for people suffering from rough sleeping (Malinen 2018). In the 1960s, the dominant offerings of the era such as psychiatric hospitals were criticized as dehumanizing 'total institutions' (cf. Goffman 1961). Simultaneously, critics also rallied against the bad quality of emergency shelters for

homeless people. A civic movement (the ‘November movement’) came into being advocating everyone’s right to personal life and home-like housing (Fredriksson 2018a).

On the wings of this call for change, the Finnish understanding of homelessness changed radically in the 1970s and the 1980s. It was no longer attributed to homeless people’s personal choices and problems but also to supply-side problems, such as deficiencies in housing policy. Psychiatric patients, people suffering from substance abuse problems, former prisoners, and emergency shelter residents and their situations were gradually seen as housing issues needing targeted housing policy level solutions (Fredriksson 2018c).

The Finnish government stepped up its commitment to ending homelessness during 1987, which was declared the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless 1987 by the United Nations (Kärkkäinen and Puttonen 2018: 105). It became an official policy goal and a fixture in Finnish government programmes, with the right to housing becoming enshrined in Finnish legislation. According to the Constitution (731/1999, section 19), ‘those who cannot obtain the means necessary for a life of dignity have the right to receive indispensable subsistence and care’, and ‘the public authorities shall promote the right of everyone to housing and the opportunity to arrange their own housing’.

Notwithstanding the strong political commitment, the everyday working practices of tackling homelessness attracted increasing criticism, mostly because of the failure to reduce long-term homelessness. Additionally, shelters accommodating homeless people in vulnerable positions on a fixed-term basis offered their inhabitants no privacy, and the rental agreements for these places were seen as humiliating, expensive, compounding psychological damage to people living in them and creating risks to social cohesion (Pleace et al. 2016: 427). Furthermore, the prerequisite that homeless persons should progress in recovering from alcohol and substance abuse dependencies before proceeding from shelters to independent housing was regarded as being too demanding. This kind of conditionality was also seen as violating homeless people’s right to own housing. It became referred to disparagingly as the ‘staircase model’ and was heavily criticized in the Nordic countries (e.g. Juhila 1992; Löfstrand 2005; Sahlin 2005).

As Finland was struggling to find effective ways of combatting long-term homelessness, in 1992, a non-profit corporation called ‘The Pathways to Housing’ (PH) was set up in New York. This organization and its originator and leader, Sam Tsemberis, are widely recognized as the creators of the original HF model, which became credited with better results than any of the existing approaches. HF soon gained much interest both within and beyond the United States, and its adaption as a principle in homelessness policy has been discussed and promoted in many European countries since the mid-2000s. The important catalyst for this adaption has been ‘The European Federation of National Organisations Working with

the Homeless' (FEANTSA). Its mission is to fight against homelessness and promote the right to housing as the most basic human right ensuring human dignity, and the organization has produced a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) to be applied in addressing homelessness as a specific problem in national strategies (e.g. [de la Porte 2014](#)). FEANTSA do advocacy work in the European Union, whose approach in tackling homelessness is highly compatible with FEANTSA's mission and definition.

FEANTSA has also offered a forum whereby HF initiatives in different countries have been widely presented and discussed during the last ten years. Their webpage ([The European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless 2021](#)) includes over 100 entries concerning HF. As a part of FEANTSA, 'The Housing First Europe (HFE) Hub' (2021) offers a European platform aiming to develop HF and promote its uptake across Europe. FEANTSA also publishes the international journal, the *European Journal of Homelessness*, with numerous articles focusing on and discussing HF ideas and initiatives (e.g. [Atherton et al. 2008](#); [Benjaminsen 2013](#); [Busch-Geertsema 2012](#); [Hansen Löfstrand and Juhila 2012](#); [Knutagård and Kristiansen 2013](#); [Raitakari and Juhila 2015](#)). The Finnish Y-foundation, whose mission is to offer rental homes for people experiencing homelessness and those who are under a threat of becoming homeless, defines itself as a key national developer of HF ([Y-Foundation 2021](#)) and has been an active partner in establishing the HFE Hub. The Finnish HF model has also been featured in the journal's articles (e.g. [Meriluoto 2018](#); [Pleace 2017](#); [Ranta 2019](#); [Tainio and Fredriksson 2009](#)).

Thus, HF has become a travelling policy idea—a transnational policy model domesticated in many countries and contexts, especially in Canada, United States and EU countries (on domestication, see [Alasuutari 2009](#)). Its success can be partly explained by the persuasive rhetoric of the key proponents of PH, who present the model as an indisputable and revolutionary turning point in homelessness policy and practices. The new model was presented as contrasting markedly with the prevailing treatment first or staircase model that emphasized step-by-step conditionality by specifying prerequisites for having permanent housing, such as 'housing readiness', sobriety or signs of recovery from serious mental health problems (e.g. [Padgett et al. 2016](#); [Tsemberis 2010](#)). Instead of this conditionality, HF advocates everyone's right to immediate access to independent housing, harm reduction, flexible, and non-judgmental service delivery based on active but non-coercive recovery orientation and argues that it is up to homeless people themselves to decide whether they wish to have supported services and treatment or not ([Pleace et al. 2016](#): 430; [Tsemberis 2010](#); [Kettunen 2013](#)). However, HF's rhetorical strategy of contrasting the 'good' new model with the 'bad' old model has not always been mindful of those grassroot-level workers who had long embraced the same principles in their day-to-day work among homeless people that PH now presented as totally new.

The claim for the HF model's superior performance has been strengthened with research evidence published in peer-review journals especially comprising randomized controlled trials but also qualitative studies on the experiences of the service users, demonstrating the superiority of the HF model in comparison to the earlier model (Hansen Löffstrand and Juhila 2017; Raitakari and Juhila 2015). Several researchers have expressed caution regarding the strong assertions of HF's effectiveness, noting that PH-related actors have been involved in many of the studies that demonstrate HF's effectiveness and that several of those studies contain skewed comparative designs. However, a main overview of extant research concluded that evidence of the good results of HF in different contexts and countries was mounting (Pleace and Bretherton 2013: 35).

Although it became known under the banner of HF, the Finnish approach has been argued to have developed independently: 'The Finnish Housing First model was born around the same time, but separately from the Pathways Housing First movement that started in the United States' (A Home of Your Own 2017: 14). The story of the Finnish HF model has been narrated in the book *From a Shelter to My Own Home: Transformation of Finnish Homelessness Policy* (Fredriksson 2018d), which introduces the key persons in developing the Finnish homelessness policy after the Second World War (cf. Ranta 2019), and on the webpages of HF (Asunto ensin 2021) and the Y-Foundation (Y-Foundation 2021). The HF pioneers in Finland have become quite adept at narrating the 2007 policy change as a success story they have invented and accomplished. That account is continuously retold and affirmed at seminars and conferences, evaluations and national and international newspaper articles.

The Finnish HF success story is presented as the achievement of certain agents of change and their enthusiastic pioneering work. Without underestimating the major contributions made by these pioneering individuals, it should be underlined that putting the HF model into practice has demanded a network of hundreds of committed actors both at national and municipal levels of government and across a wide array of non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, as already mentioned, some of these actors had shared and implemented the ethos and practices that later became branded as the HF model at grassroot levels a long time before it was modelled and launched 'officially'.

The first character that is usually mentioned in the story is Jan Vapaavuori, who acted as a Minister of Housing in 2007–2011 and took on his agenda to run down shelters and to develop new solutions to the problem of long-term homelessness despite possible resistance of various stakeholders (Fredriksson 2018b). Two men, Juha Kaakinen and Peter Fredriksson, allegedly convinced him that something needed to be done to address the unacceptable problem of long-term homelessness which had been escalating, especially in Helsinki (Lassy 2018). Juha Kaakinen had in his early career been responsible for the homelessness work in Helsinki, then went on to lead the first two governmental programmes to reduce long-term

homelessness (PAAVO I and II), and ended up as the chief executive officer of the Y-Foundation. Peter Fredriksson was the investigator of the Finnish Government's housing policy in 1999, and after that, he worked as an expert in the Ministry of Environment and edited the widely noted 2018 volume *From a Shelter to My Own Home: Transformation of Finnish Homelessness Policy*.

A critical juncture is said to have occurred in 2007, when Jan Vapaavuori appointed a group of four men, later referred to as the 'four wise men', to create a basis for a new long-term homelessness policy. The group included Paavo Voutilainen (Director of Social Services in Helsinki), Hannu Puttonen (the Chief Executive Officer of the Y-Foundation at the time), Ilkka Taipale (Ph.D. specialist in men's homelessness, civil activist, and former politician), and Eero Huovinen (Bishop of Helsinki). Juha Kaakinen acted as a secretary of the group with Anu Haapanen. The group submitted a report titled *Name on the Door (Nimi ovelsa)* to Jan Vapaavuori. The report was the first introduction of HF in Finland. The group concluded that ending homelessness 'requires adopting the Housing First principle, where a person does not have to first change their life around in order to earn the basic right to housing. Instead, housing is the prerequisite that allows other problems to be solved' (*A Home of Your Own 2017*: 9; *Nimi ovelsa 2007*: 13). The report was well received by the government and led to the adoption of the series of HF-inspired programmes to reduce and end long-term homelessness in Finland.

### **Four Homelessness Programmes (2008–2022)**

After submitting the 'Name on the Door' report (2007), the next phase in the success story focuses on Minister Jan Vapaavuori's zealous commitment to the HF model's content and premises. According to Peter Fredriksson (2018b: 140), he started immediately after publishing the report to organize long-lasting governmental funding for housing and related support services, which was crucial in making the HF model true in Finland. In 2008 the Finnish government launched 'The programme to reduce long-term homelessness PAAVO I' (2008–2011). This national programme started a series of four governmental programmes administered by the Ministry of Environment that are all grounded on the idea of HF. Each programme has continued reducing and ending long-term homelessness by learning from the previous national programmes.

In addition to being described in final self-assessing reports by the programmes themselves (Kaakinen 2012; Karppinen and Fredriksson 2016; Karppinen 2020), the three projects completed to date have been thoroughly reviewed externally with their strengths and weaknesses in published documents (Pitkänen et al. 2019; Pleace et al. 2015). The evaluations include extensive international reviews of the first two programmes, whose authors are well-known homelessness researchers specialized in HF (Busch-Geertsema 2010; Pleace et al. 2015). The summary

evaluation of all three programmes before starting the fourth one in 2020 is also comprehensive, performed by authors with long experience in homelessness work and research (Pitkänen et al. 2019). This disciplined iterative process based on continuous assessment has played a key role in the plausibility and the appeal of HF policy in Finland.

Strong, long-term government commitment, funding and guidance make the story of Finnish HF distinctive compared with that of many other European countries, where the model's momentum has been more humble and precarious (e.g. Pleace 2017). The process has continued across well over 10 years, even as the government's composition has changed. This is partly because there have always been parties from the previous government in changed compositions who have already committed to advance the HF policy. This kind of policy continuity across governments of different complexions is a fairly common occurrence in the centrist and consensual culture of the Finnish political system (Saukkonen 2012).

Besides strong governmental support, the idea of HF is widely regarded and accepted as a good policy and practice among local developers and social and health care practitioners in municipalities. Besides the successful promotion work of core agents presented in the previous section and the good results of HF practices, perhaps the most crucial reason for the wide acceptance and consensus is that the responsibilities for running various HF programmes have been integrated into the major administrative bodies from the state down to the municipalities (e.g. agreements between the state and cities) (Pleace et al. 2016: 427).

The contents and aims of the four programmes can be captured best in their own words.

*The programme to reduce long-term homelessness PAAVO I (2008–2011).* The core aim of Paavo 1 was to tackle long-term homelessness and to improve prevention of homelessness. The target was to halve long-term homelessness by year 2011 by creating sustainable and permanent solutions. The programme was designed to deliver at least 1,250 new dwellings and supported housing places for long-term homeless people in the 10 participating cities. A key target was to cease using shared shelters and to replace them with housing units with permanent tenancies. Preventive measures, such as housing advice and the national project on supported youth housing were also included in the PAAVO 1 programme. (Pleace et al. 2015: 17; see also Kaakinen 2012: 3)

*The programme to reduce long-term homelessness PAAVO II (2012–2015).* Elimination of long-term homelessness by 2015, reduction of the risk of long-term homelessness by making the use of social housing rental stock more efficient, and creation of more effective measures for preventing homelessness. (Pleace et al. 2015: 20)

*The action plan for preventing homelessness in Finland AUNE (2016–2019).* The goal of the action plan was to link the work on homelessness more extensively to



the whole of the work on preventing social exclusion based on the Housing First principle. In practice, this means ensuring that housing is secured whenever the client is met in the service system. The target group of the programme includes people who have recently become homeless and those who have been homeless for longer periods, as well as people at risk of becoming homeless, such as young people or families overburdened by debt or at risk of eviction, some of the young people leaving their childhood home for independent life, people undergoing mental health rehabilitation and substance abuse rehabilitation, clients transitioning from institutions to independent living, child welfare after-care service clients, and some of the young people whose child welfare after-care ends when they become 21, asylum seekers who have received a residence permit but have failed to integrate, as well as homeless released prisoners or prisoners going on parole. (Action plan for preventing homelessness in Finland 2016)

*Cooperation programme to halve homelessness (2020–2022).* The key objective is to strengthen the homelessness work of local authorities through the use and development of social services by allocating more affordable housing for people at risk of homelessness. This will be achieved when municipalities set up cooperation networks at local level and homelessness work will be established as part of the core activities of municipalities. (Ministry of Environment 2021)

In the first two programmes, the main emphasis was on creating permanent housing tenancies for long-term homeless people and getting rid of fixed-term housing solutions, especially shelters. This emphasis was accompanied by the aim of preventing homelessness. In addition to macro-level efforts to increase affordable housing and to run down shelters, the third programme AUNE, put more emphasis on encountering homeless people and people at risk of losing their homes personally in the service system. Developing targeted so-called housing social work (Granfelt 2015) was seen as particularly important in preventing homelessness. The programme also listed the categories of people (target groups) with whom this work should be strengthened.

The fourth programme is ongoing at the time of writing. It aims to establish HF as the basic principle of homelessness work across the country, embedded in municipal governments' efforts. The programme emphasizes cooperation between different municipalities. Its 2020 implementation plan titled *Housing First 2.0: Let's do jointly a possibility for everyone* was produced in a change laboratory process (cf. Engeström et al. 1996) encompassing many key actors doing homelessness work in large Finnish cities and non-governmental organizations (Asunto ensin 2.0). It calls for better integration of substance abuse, mental health, and housing services alongside a low-threshold approach in reducing and preventing homelessness and encountering homeless people and people at risk of becoming

homeless. For example, outreach work and integrated work based on home visiting are presented as good HF practices.

The programmes have also been accompanied by separately financed research-oriented developmental projects and academic research projects that have supported and evaluated the accomplishments of the programmes and produced empirically based knowledge for further developing them. The Name on the Door project (2010–2012), funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (nowadays Business Finland), created HF-based services, constructed a network among key HF actors in big cities and NGOs, collaborated with a PH organization in New York, and produced the first website for HF in Finland ([Asunto ensin 2021](#)). The above-mentioned change laboratory ‘Learning and agency across sectors and levels to eradicate homelessness’ led by Annalisa Sannino has been partly funded by the Finnish Work Environmental Fund. As part of The Future of Housing and Living Programme, the Academy of Finland funded a 2011–2015 research project entitled ‘Long-Term Homelessness and Finnish adaptations of the ‘Housing First’ model, led by Kirsi Juhila.

Besides these large projects, there is an increasing number of individual researchers’ publications concerning the Finnish HF model. One noteworthy example is Riitta Granfelt’s research on housing social work among people with a criminal background and homeless women’s vulnerable situations, which has been particularly significant in the Finnish HF context (e.g. [Granfelt 2014, 2015, 2020](#)). She also participated in the international review work of both PAAVO programmes ([Pleace et al. 2015](#)).

To conclude, HF has been established as the core idea in the Finnish long-term homelessness policy during the four programmes and with these programmes. The research of HF has also played its part in this establishment process. The process started from the governmental level, and via the programmes it has been implemented in municipalities and adopted as a key principle in many public and non-governmental services doing work with homeless people. Although the process has been administratively led by changing governments, the criticism about the previously prevalent staircase model had been for a long time a substantial catalyst for change both at grassroots level homelessness work and among researchers. It can be argued that the pioneer agents of HF in Finland (see previous section) channelled this criticism and managed to convince the governmental actors, especially the Minister of Housing Jan Vapaavuori at the time, of the need for a new approach in long-term homelessness policy and practice. In 2021, the Ministry of Environment (2021) declared absolute commitment to HF by listing five principles and solutions to homelessness:

- Name on the door. A basic human need for privacy, a place of your own, a home. A rental contract of your own (not a second-hand contract or temporary social contract).

- Permanent housing allows other problems to be solved. Abstaining from drinking is not a requirement for permanent housing.
- Separation of housing and services. Individually tailored services based on an assessment of needs.
- Solutions to homelessness cannot be temporary.
- Conventional shelters and dormitory-type hostels are no longer adequate responses to homelessness. Hostels will be converted into supported housing units.

Despite the broad and strong commitment to these principles across governments and service providers alongside homeless people themselves, the principles are not always easy to execute. Whether and how they are realized in practice determines the success of the HF policy in Finland, to which we now turn.

### A Policy Success?

The Finnish long-term homelessness policy relying on the principles of HF has been developed over a decade. During that time, it has been established as a largely shared and widely implemented way to reduce and prevent long-term homelessness in Finland. Thus, without a doubt, HF can be described as a policy success story. However, in addition to the complete success it has been argued to be, we also recognize elements of what [McConnell \(2010\)](#) refers to as 'resilient' and 'conflicted' success.

The political and programmatic success has made the HF model a general norm. The HF model in Finland can be characterized as a *total success* in the *political* sense, as there is no major opposition to it. It is supported by politicians, public servants, researchers, various professionals doing homelessness work and homeless people themselves. The explanation of this success is that the HF policy is grounded on the universal value of the human right and need for a decent, permanent home regardless of possible social and health problems or poverty. Opposition to HF policy can be dismissed as old-fashioned and violating human rights. Another explanation is that multiple actors at different levels were integrated and committed to carry out the governmental programmes by using, for example, financial incentives and information steering. From a critical point of view, it is possible to claim that making such a big difference between old and new homelessness policy is not always a fair way of telling the story, advocating housing as a human right and basic need has much longer than just 20 years' history in Finland. However, the HF success story benefits become stronger when this difference is underlined ([Hansen Löfstrand and Juhila 2017](#)).

The credit for achieving these extraordinary levels of political support goes foremost to the pioneers and promoters of HF in Finland and the comprehensive development work and its presentation, evaluation and documentation in

various forums. Since the beginning of the PAAVO I programme, the website 'Asunto ensin' (Housing First) has gathered and communicated information on homelessness and the ongoing programmes in general, and on the research of HF (Asunto ensin 2021). Furthermore, the Y-Foundation informs and discusses HF thoroughly on its website (Y-Foundation 2021). These reports and reviews on long-term homelessness programmes offer much information and evaluation knowledge as well. Furthermore, the Finnish HF model has also received much attention and recognition internationally, especially in Europe. Hannele Tainio and Peter Fredriksson (2009)'s account of the birth and uptake of Finnish HF policy in the *European Journal of Homelessness* can be regarded as the beginning of the international interest the 'Finnish approach' soon began to elicit. Another important text increasing international interest was the review of the first two long-term homelessness programmes written by Nicolas Pleace, Dennis Culhane, Riitta Granfelt and Marcus Knutagård (2015; see also Pleace et al. 2016). The growing positive international reputation increased the interest and enquiries about the Finnish way of tackling long-term homelessness. This resulted in the handbook-style *A Home of Your Own* (2017), published by the Y-Foundation. In a positive feedback cycle, this growing international recognition and the availability of its own 'bible' in the form of the handbook have further strengthened the support of the story of the HF model in Finland. It has been framed as a national achievement that Finns can be proud of.

In addition to its strong ideational, political success the Finnish HF model also yielded *programmatic* success in implementation. In their review, Pleace et al. (2015: 17–8) write that among the most important achievements of PAAVO I is the 'conversion of homelessness shelters to Housing First units' and accompanied professional developments based on harm reduction and communality. The conversion process 'reduced long-term homelessness by 28% between 2008 and 2011' and offered permanent, own homes—names on the doors—for homeless people. This positive trend continued after 2011, as long-term homelessness reduced to one-third by 2019 until it slightly increased again in 2020 (*Homelessness in Finland 2020: Report 2021*: 24).

Converting existing (shelter) buildings to congregate housing units with residents' permanent rental agreements make the Finnish HF model different in comparing the PH and to most other HF models in Europe. It has raised doubt about whether the Finnish HF model follows the core principles of HF that emphasize, among other things, scattered housing, and people's right to live in ordinary neighbourhoods (Pleace et al. 2016: 431–434). However, the advocates of the Finnish approach claim this original feature to be foremost a sign of success. Congregate housing units were also argued as a possible solution in a constraining position due to the tight housing market situation, especially in Helsinki.

Besides congregate housing units, the programmes, especially PAAVO II, have considerably increased the number of scattered housing alternatives. According to Pleace et al. (2015: 20), the scattered housing projects were complemented 'with

a strong social integration dimension,' and 'housing advice as well as co-operation with social and health care services' were developed during PAAVO II. Furthermore, the housing units strengthened community work in nearby neighbourhoods to reduce stigma related to the units and their residents (Pleace et al. 2015: 20).

In terms of *endurance assessment*, the Finnish HF policy has features of what McConnell (2010) refers to as a resilient success: the capacity of the policy to change and transform programme by programme when facing difficulties. Difficulties have not led to undermining the core principles of HF. Namely, they have not created such opposition that would question the model's basic idea. Indeed, the HF model's progress since 2008 can be seen as a sign of resilient success; each programme has been designed to solve the assessed deficiencies of the previous one. In assessing PAAVO I, PAAVO II, and AUNE, the reviewers pick up one serious difficulty; namely, the non-sufficient establishment of HF at the municipality level. However, the resiliency is present in their formulation in the sense that this difficulty is planned to be overcome during the following programme (Pitkänen et al. 2019, summary):

Based on the assessment, it appears that the prevention and eradication of homelessness are not sufficiently established in the activities of municipalities. With this in mind, the assessment proposes carrying out a national project to establish work on homelessness in municipalities during the new government term.

There are also minor signs of a *conflicted success* in the Finnish HF policy, in the form of several unwanted or even controversial results. Perhaps the most serious indicator that the model is less than fully effective in eradicating long-term homelessness remains the continued demand for emergency housing services and temporary accommodation in the large Finnish cities. Homeless people staying in these shelters often have difficulties getting a permanent tenancy and home due to the lack of affordable housing. Thus, they sometimes must stay in the shelters and wait for permanent housing for a long time, even years (Syrjälä 2022). This is controversial since the longer one needs to stay in temporary accommodation, the more these temporary sites become experienced like the old shelters that the HF policy wanted to discard. Additionally, there are still supported housing solutions that operate on the 'old conditionality', that is, prerequisites of abstinence, adherence, co-operation and recovery. This can also lead to the practices associated with the officially discarded staircase model: as there are many people waiting for a permanent home in the emergency housing services, the most 'housing ready' ones may be in a better position to get their own home. This risks excluding homeless people in the most vulnerable positions—people who are defined as incapable of making the right choices and having insufficient skills for living independently. To avoid this risk of 'creaming off' (Lipsky 1979), the last two programmes have

concentrated more on developing professional, supportive work, such as housing social work and women-specific work among the most vulnerable homeless people.

Related to these signs of conflicted success, the number of long-term homeless will not necessarily reduce in the future as it has since the turn of the millennium. Perhaps the 'low-hanging fruit' has been picked, and it is now the most elusive homelessness cases that remain. Moreover, for the first time in eight years, long-term homelessness increased slightly in three large Finnish cities in 2020 ([Homelessness in Finland 2020: Report 2021](#): 24). The reasons for the increase can be manifold, such as emerging new groups of long-term homelessness, social and financial consequences of COVID-19 and lack of affordable housing. Lack of affordable housing may even increase in the future, as many rental blocks of flats built in the 1970s need total renovation or are in danger of being demolished. The continuation of the success of the HF story requires that the setbacks in decreasing long-term homelessness can be explained as temporary phenomena and not as the outcome or failure of the HF policy.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we have told the success story of the Finnish long-term homelessness policy, in which creating the HF model is constructed as an essential turning point and move forward. Our main task was to examine what made this policy change possible in a specific historical time. How did the HF model become the official truth and strategy in the battle against long-term homelessness? We argue that this kind of policy success requires a good brand and a clear idea that differs profoundly from the previous policy. The HF model got its strength partly from a strong contrast between the 'old' staircase model labelled unsuccessful (the enemy) and the new HF model that could overcome the deficiencies in the policy that had thus far prevailed in combatting long-term homelessness (the winner). Another important storyline in the success story is how the Finnish HF model is constructed compared with the other HF models in Europe and North America. Its domestication has thus not been straightforward. The model has been tailored in a distinctively Finnish way; it has been hailed as 'our model', an original Finnish invention that is worth marketing internationally. However, the success of the Finnish implementation of the HF model is partly explained by long-term homelessness not being such a massive social problem in Finland in the first place, certainly when compared to many other OECD countries.

A good story requires enthusiastic and powerful agents with good intentions and visions to overcome serious social problems, such as long-term homelessness, in society. In this chapter, we have named several agents who have been given the role of key pioneers in the Finnish HF story. However, no success story would

last over time if narrated and promoted only by a few great persons. There needs to be a network of dedicated people at different levels of society. The Finnish HF model is a real success story in the sense that although the HF-based long-term homelessness programmes were launched at the governmental level, big cities and non-governmental organizations were willing to implement them effectively. Furthermore, successful implementation would not have been possible without the commitment of the front-line professionals working with homeless people and with former homeless people who have got or been promised to get their own homes, thanks to the HF model.

Although having become a prevalent idea in the Finnish homelessness policy and practices, it would be too much to claim that the principles of HF are followed comprehensively by all Finnish welfare services in their encounters with homeless people. There may be differences, for example, between big and small municipalities and various service providers. Furthermore, practices related to the staircase model still often exist due to the lack of affordable housing or how homeless people are categorized and treated in the service systems according to their 'housing readiness'. Change in the homelessness policy also demands changes in the front-line working cultures, professional identities, and the expectations of homeless people themselves, which may happen more slowly than the declared policy. The HF model especially increases housing social work and other supportive home visit work done in former homeless people's homes. Encounters in private home spaces are challenging and demanding for both service users and professionals but can have a crucial role in preventing homelessness (Juhila et al. 2021; Ranta and Juhila 2020).

The greatest success of the Finnish HF model is that it put on the national agenda the most excluded and vulnerable citizens and called for respect for their rights and basic needs in housing. In that sense, it has 'delivered' on the advocacy for everyone's right to their own home that civil activists, service users, social work professionals and researchers have engaged in ever since the 1960s' critiques of 'total institutions'. The four government programmes have been crucial in enshrining this human rights principle. Time will tell if more such programmes will be required to maintain the normative power it has achieved.

### Questions for discussion

1. What are the key ideas of the Finnish HF model?
2. What are the key features of the success of the Finnish HF model and what kind of criticism can be levelled against it?
3. What are the most important consequences of the Finnish HF model from the point of homeless people themselves and people working with them?
4. What lessons can be learned from the Finnish HF model in combatting other difficult social problems or long-term homelessness in different countries?

## Links to online resources

- A Home of Your Own. Housing First and ending homelessness in Finland. 2017. Helsinki: Y-Foundation: <https://ysaatio.fi/en/housing-first-finland/a-home-of-your-own-handbook/>.
- Pleace, N., D. Culhane, R. Granfelt and M. Knutagård. 2015. The Finnish homelessness strategy: An international review. Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment. <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/153258/>.
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