
Homelessness Strategies and Innovations

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› **Abstract** *This chapter reviews research literature on national homelessness strategies. National strategies have emerged mainly in the advanced welfare regimes of northern and western Europe and in just a few countries in southern and eastern Europe. The chapter discusses how some features of the national homelessness strategies follow the lines of welfare regimes, while there is also considerable variation within welfare regimes as the interplay between housing policies and social policies differs in countries belonging to the same type of regime. A clear pattern in almost all countries and their strategies is the spread of the housing first paradigm. The chapter also discusses the results of evaluations of national strategies, focusing on issues of organisation and implementation at the local level. It identifies needs for future research where migration patterns and the impact of the financial and economic crisis raise challenges that transgress the national context. There is also a need for more comparative research at local and regional levels about the processes of implementation, organisation and social practices following the development of national strategies. Finally, there is a need for more specific knowledge about the actual nature of interventions set in place under the umbrella of the housing first paradigm, and especially for more effect studies of interventions in a European context.*

› **Keywords** *National strategy; welfare regime; intervention; organisation; implementation*

Introduction

National homelessness strategies have been adopted in a number of European countries over the last decade. The European Observatory of Homelessness has analysed the formation, characteristics and implementation of these strategies in various articles and policy evaluations. The insights obtained from this work add to those set out in a growing national literature of policy evaluations. National strategies to tackle homelessness have primarily been adopted in the northern and western European countries. The more holistic approaches embedded in these strategies replace a range of narrower projects, programmes and initiatives such as the Rough Sleepers Initiative in England and Scotland (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2005; Anderson, 2007a), the Homeless Initiative in Ireland (O'Sullivan, 2008), the City Programme in Denmark (Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2007) and Project Homeless in Norway (Dyb, 2005). An holistic approach does not necessarily mean that the strategy targets all identified features and problems regarding homelessness and therefore there is a need to examine the contents of such strategies.

Some European countries, in particular the transitional countries, have not developed national homelessness strategies but have launched limited programmes. It is of interest to review the ideas and objectives of these programmes and to compare them with the more detailed strategies. Are they radically different or primarily similar? As we shall discuss, differences are identified both between strategies in northern Europe (Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2009) and between programmes in transitional countries (Filipovič-Hrast *et al.*, 2009).

Examination of a number of homelessness strategies (Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2009; Baptista, 2009; Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2008; Anderson, 2007b) indicates a broad division between housing first and other approaches aiming to solve or alleviate the problem of homelessness. Examples of other approaches are the staircase of transition (Sahlin, 2005, 1998), housing ready models or interventions that focus on the provision of low-threshold services rather than housing. Our review suggests that developed homelessness strategies tend to advocate housing-first-based approaches and that comprehensive strategies express a 'new way of governing': moving from traditional government to governance structures involving a broad set of stakeholders.

This chapter is a review of existing research, discussions and documentation on national homelessness strategies within the European Observatory of Homelessness and beyond. The chapter first focuses on the national strategies from a welfare state perspective and then discusses the understanding of homelessness implied

in the national strategies and the interventions set in place under the frameworks of the national strategies. The last section raises some issues and questions to be analysed in future research.

National Homelessness Strategies and Mature Welfare Regimes

The emergence of national homelessness strategies can generally be seen as an advanced stage of policy formation targeting socially excluded groups. Recent research has pointed to the need to understand the formation of national strategies within the context of welfare regimes and the similarities and differences between and within welfare regimes (Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2009). Holistic approaches to homelessness through the forming of national strategies have primarily appeared in the relatively advanced welfare states of northern Europe. Though mainly following a longer trend of directing programme funding and activities towards particular marginal groups, the adoption of national homelessness strategies is a relatively recent phenomenon. Critiques of the often short-term sustainability of existing programme activities, increased public and political awareness of the homelessness problem and an enhanced understanding of the need for more long-term continuity in service provision have contributed to the need to establish national homelessness policy frameworks. A growing awareness of the need to address complex problems of organisation and implementation, often involving many stakeholders and different levels of government, has also contributed to the formation of national strategies.

Analysis of the formation and implementation of national strategies in mature welfare states such as the Nordic countries, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands¹ must begin with an understanding of the complex institutional context of welfare state arrangements at both national and local levels and the existence of local intervention and allocation models in both social and housing policies.

An analysis of the similarities and differences within the Nordic countries (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2008) was further developed in a comparative analysis by Benjaminsen *et al.* (2009) of the national strategies in the Nordic social democratic welfare states (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) and the Anglo-Saxon liberal welfare states (England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). Collectively, these papers identify differences such as a stronger involvement and autonomy of local government in the Scandinavian countries, whereas a rights-

¹ A programme in the four largest Dutch cities – *Strategy Plan for Social Relief* (2006) – is in many ways comparable to the national strategies in other countries such as Denmark or Finland, where activities have also been targeted at larger municipalities where the majority of the national homeless population is found.

based approach in terms of the statutory definition of homelessness and the stronger involvement of NGOs is more evident in the liberal regimes. But there are also similarities, particularly in the emphasis on outcomes such as reducing the use of temporary accommodation, shortening the length of stays in shelters, providing long-term or permanent accommodation, offering individualised services and preventing homelessness primarily by reducing the number of evictions. The identified similarities across different welfare regimes very likely reflect an effective spread of knowledge through international networks.

In varying degrees the strategies incorporate a housing first approach. The general orientation towards a housing first model indicates the growing recognition of policy makers that (re)settling people, if necessary with support, is the most robust and sustainable way of ending or reducing homelessness. However, although members of the same welfare state family, a marked difference exists in approaches between Sweden and the other Nordic countries. There is some orientation towards a housing first approach in the Swedish strategy, but on a local level Sweden continues primarily to follow the staircase of transition model.

A new national strategy adopted in France in 2010 focuses not only on homelessness but also on people residing in substandard housing. The programme identifies two main principles: 'the organization of a Public Service for Accommodation and Access to Housing as well as a priority given to housing (the 'Housing First' approach)' (p.2) – emphasising both the provision of care and the priority of housing. The programme involves experimental housing first projects, but also more traditional solutions such as intermediate boarding houses aimed at individuals for whom access to ordinary housing is 'hypothetical' (p.6).

Scale and constitutional arrangements within a country affect the need for and possibility of developing a comprehensive national strategy. This is especially the case in Germany, where responsibility for social policy within the federal structure is placed mainly on the sixteen states (*Bundesländer*). Based on experiences from earlier programmes, a new action plan to prevent homelessness was adopted in the largest state of North-Rhine Westphalia in 2009 (MGEPA, 2009). The focus is mainly on providing support for model projects aimed at prevention, reintegration and integration of support systems.

A regional strategy also exists in the Netherlands. The *Strategy Plan for Social Relief* (2006), agreed by the Dutch government and the four major cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht) and lasting from 2006 to 2013, links homelessness closely to diagnoses such as drug addiction and mental health problems. There is a focus on developing targeted housing and on integrating housing and support systems. The approach may be best characterised as an integrated chain approach,

but it also includes minor experimental housing first schemes. In the context of welfare regimes, Esping-Andersen (1990, pp.51–2) characterises the Netherlands as a ‘borderline case’ closer to the Nordic cluster than the continental states.

Summarising the findings of the various analyses of national strategies, one key conclusion is that housing first is the dominant approach in the majority of strategies and that divergence from the housing first approach does not follow any particular regime or welfare state model.

Strategies in Emerging Welfare Regimes

The formation of national homelessness strategies is almost entirely restricted to countries with a long tradition of welfare services for marginal groups. However, strategies have also emerged in a few European countries that have undergone substantial economic and social transformation over recent decades, and where social services directed at vulnerable groups are still underdeveloped. For these countries, an understanding of the changing role of the traditionally weak state in service provision for marginal groups is crucial.

Following Jessop’s (2007) strategic-relational theory of the state, Baptista and O’Sullivan (2008) argue that it is problematic to understand the role of the state in general and that it must instead be understood in specific contexts. Developments must be located in their particular historical, institutional and strategic contexts. This insight probably holds not only for the relatively young welfare states but also for the advanced welfare states, as a range of evaluations of policy implementation processes underline (see below). Baptista and O’Sullivan illustrate this important point in their analysis of the role of the state in developing homelessness strategies in Portugal and Ireland, two countries that have undergone rapid economic and social transformation since the 1980s.² They argue:

... in both Ireland and Portugal, there is evidence of changes in the understanding of homelessness among key stakeholders and in the development of national and local strategies. The key trend identified in both countries is that of the state taking ownership or control over homeless policy and attempting to devise reasonably coherent frameworks in which to address the issue. (2008, p.40)

In a further analysis of the Irish case, O’Sullivan (2008) demonstrates that a dramatic shift occurred in relation to homelessness services following the passing of the Homeless Persons Bill in 1983 (Harvey, 2008). He argues that an enhanced strategic focus on providing a coordinated response to homelessness, together with

² Portugal belongs to the group of Mediterranean welfare states and Ireland belongs to the cluster of mature liberal welfare states.

increased funding, contributed to a decrease in homelessness over the course of a decade. Similarly, in an analysis of the process of developing the Portuguese homelessness strategy, Baptista (2009, p.72) notes that the 'drafting of the first national strategy on homelessness represents a shift in the traditional role of the Portuguese state in this area'.

The political transition in eastern Europe has brought not only rapid economic and social development, but also new mechanisms of social exclusion, particularly in the domain of housing policies following the widespread privatisation of large parts of the mass housing stock. Though social programmes directed at homelessness can be observed in a growing number of countries, considerable barriers in many eastern European countries prevent the homelessness problem being placed higher on the national policy agenda, in terms of both awareness and concern about the conditions of marginal groups and systemic and financial barriers. With the exception of Portugal and Poland, the Mediterranean and eastern European countries are not at the stage of developing holistic homelessness strategies.

Wygnańska (2009) has analysed the process of developing a national homelessness strategy in Poland – a strategy that is still at the drafting stage. She concludes that significant progress in recent years can be identified as stakeholders have managed to work out useful policy-making mechanisms. She emphasises the continued need for NGOs to recognise and make use of their potential in advocacy as they play an important role in forcing governments to improve policies to benefit NGO clients. This reflects a reality where the state still takes relatively little responsibility for providing social services to marginal groups.

Attention should also be paid to homelessness intervention policies in some of the other newer EU member states, even though they have not developed overall strategies. Analysing homelessness policies in Slovenia and Hungary, Filipovič-Hrast *et al.* (2009) found that the two countries have chosen to follow quite different paths. The development programme on homeless provision in Hungary is based on the idea that reintegration of homeless people can be achieved through move-on houses, affordable housing and individual tailored support. However, the financial support from the Hungarian state is limited. Filipovič-Hrast (2008) argues that in the case of Slovenia the main characteristic is the absence of a homelessness policy, although there is a growing supply of low-threshold services. This is also largely the case in the Czech Republic (Hradecký, 2008).

Understanding Homelessness: Intervention Models and Innovations

Housing policies and social policies: understanding the complex nature of homelessness

The national homelessness strategies not only reveal similarities and differences among and within different welfare regimes, but also reflect differences in housing policies and social policies and in the underlying understanding of homelessness across the countries. Baptista (2009, p.72) argues, in her analysis of the drafting of the Portuguese strategy, that a fundamental challenge is the 'perception of homelessness as a phenomenon with complex individual components that must be tackled on a case-by-case basis' – a perception that 'does not lend itself to the notion of needing an overall national strategy'. This conclusion may probably be applied to many other countries. The understanding of homelessness as a consequence of the interplay between structural exclusion mechanisms and individual vulnerabilities is most clearly found in the homelessness strategies of the Anglo-Saxon countries such as England and Scotland. In these strategies there is an explicit focus on both alleviating shortages of affordable housing and the need for individual wraparound services (see Anderson, 2007a, for further details).

The national strategies in the Nordic countries focus mainly on individual support needs and on overcoming organisational and local barriers for providing such support. The link to general housing policies is less explicit. This may reflect the fact that housing policy has traditionally been incorporated into general welfare policy in the Nordic countries. However, research also points to considerable differences within the Scandinavian countries and indicates that such universalistic inclusionary housing policies can be rolled back (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2006).

Benjaminsen and Dyb (2008) discuss how differences in housing policies and in social policies can be observed among the Nordic countries. In Sweden, the abolition of municipal housing queues in most municipalities has led to greater difficulties for obtaining first-hand permanent rental contracts and to the use of secondary contracts in the field of housing provision for the homeless (see Sahlin, 2005). Benjaminsen and Dyb compare the patterns of homelessness among the Scandinavian countries, explaining their findings in terms of variations in national strategies, housing and social policies and underlying intervention models. They argue that the small, but significantly higher, rates of homelessness in medium-sized Swedish cities, compared with Danish and Norwegian cities, is a consequence of the more widespread use of the staircase model and the secondary housing market in Sweden than in Denmark and Norway, which to a larger extent follow a housing first approach.

As more and more countries complete the policy cycles of typically three to five years, more data from detailed evaluations becomes available. An important lesson is that the structural barriers for alleviating homelessness are often not adequately addressed or are too large in scale to be impacted by the strategic initiatives. In a detailed evaluation of the implementation of the Scottish national strategy, Anderson (2007b) concludes that progress on achieving the goals set out in the strategy was constrained by an overall lack of sufficient affordable, secure, good quality housing and support, despite proposals to increase the use of the private rental sector to alleviate the shortage. Equally, in their evaluation of the Norwegian strategy, Dyb *et al.* (2008) point to mixed results in realising strategic goals. A survey of municipalities shows that the shortage of housing is perceived as the most important barrier to achieving these strategic goals.

Interventions and innovations

The various analyses of the national strategies to date show that the housing first approach has had a considerable influence on the framing of interventions and innovations. A fundamental principle of the housing first approach is the importance of establishing a secure and permanent housing solution early in the course of an intervention and at the same time attaching the social and psychological supports necessary for the individual to stay housed and to uphold and maintain daily activities. A considerable body of randomised controlled trials, almost solely from the United States, document the effects of early housing interventions and individual social support (see Nelson and Aubry, 2007; Coldwell and Bendner, 2007).

Content analysis of the various national strategies shows that most of the documents bear a clear imprint of the housing first approach. As mentioned above, Benjaminsen *et al.* (2009), in their comparison of national strategies in the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries, conclude that there are considerable similarities in methods and approaches and that a common thread is the adoption of the housing first approach. The various strategy documents generally reveal a considerable common influence, indicative of the spread of knowledge about effective interventions through international networks such as within the Open Method of Coordination in the EU. This often follows a longer trend in these countries of developing more targeted interventions in response to criticism that earlier programmes were not sufficiently directed at meeting the specific support needs of homeless people.

Different intervention models are identified in the literature. In the evaluation of the Norwegian strategy, Dyb (2005), following the earlier workings of Sahlin (1998) and Harvey (1998), distinguishes between the normalisation model, the tiered model and the staircase model. The normalisation model is a variant of the housing first approach as normalisation refers to the housing situation of the individual and there is an emphasis on an early stabilisation of the housing situation, preferably in

ordinary housing with intermediate or permanent support and services in accordance with individual needs. The tiered model has two phases with a period in transitional housing between, for instance, a stay in a hostel and independent housing. The staircase model (Sahlin, 2005) follows the opposite logic to the housing first model as the individual has to demonstrate the ability to live independently first by progressing through a series of steps on a housing ladder, most often with advancement attached to success in substance use treatment, etc.

As mentioned above, for structural reasons the staircase model is particularly predominant in Sweden. However, the influence of the housing first approach is clearly seen in the Swedish national strategy, with its ambition of turning interventions away from the staircase model and towards a housing first model by improving entry into the ordinary housing market. Early criticism from Swedish research of the staircase approach had considerable impact on the reorientation of the Norwegian strategy, in the early formation stage, away from the staircase approach towards housing first. An important result from the Norwegian evaluation is the positive experience with housing-first-based interventions (Dyb, 2005; Ytrehus *et al.*, 2008). Also within the Nordic sphere, Tainio and Fredriksson (2009) analyse the Finnish homelessness strategy and observe how the staircase model has been predominant in the provision for long-term homeless people in Finland but that the recently established programme to reduce long-term homelessness aims at extending housing first principles to homeless people with high levels of support needs.

Housing first has been adopted as the overall principle of the Danish strategy. Knowledge from international literature on effect studies, particularly the methods of critical time intervention, case management and assertive community treatment (ACT), has been used to determine methods for providing social support in housing. The strategy argues that interventions should be targeted with reference to the heterogeneous support needs of homeless people. Some individuals need support primarily in a transition phase between a stay in a homeless hostel and independent housing, and critical time intervention in the form of a case manager for a period of nine months is the primary support for this group. Others need more permanent individual support from a case manager. Both the methods of critical time intervention and case management assume that the individual can make use of existing treatment systems such as psychiatric services and substance abuse treatment, but needs help to maintain continuous contact with treatment facilities and also needs social support in everyday life. In contrast, ACT teams provide treatments, for instance psychological and substance use counselling, through a floating support team and are aimed at individuals with very complex problems who cannot utilise other treatment and support facilities.

Organisation and implementation

The creation of homelessness strategies may be interpreted as a shift from traditional ways of governing to a governance model where the state primarily steers rather than rows. Common conceptions of governance identify the decline of the state in the steering process, however, Pierre (2000) sees the change as a reorientation of the state and of the state's ability to adapt to external changes. Although the concept of governance has a variety of interpretations, it may roughly be described as involving a range of public and private stakeholders in policy shaping and implementation.

The national strategies reflect the different institutional set-ups across the various countries. One important issue is the division of responsibilities among different stakeholders such as central government, local government and NGOs. While the importance of local government responsibility is emphasised in all countries, the role of NGOs varies considerably. Benjaminsen *et al.* (2009) show how the role of NGOs is emphasised in the strategies in Anglo-Saxon countries, whereas the key players in the Scandinavian countries are mainly the municipalities, reflecting general differences in the underlying welfare state model. An example is the Danish strategy, where new interventions are negotiated directly and bilaterally by the central government and each municipality involved in the strategy, and are generally anchored within the existing, relatively extensive, Social Assistance Act, which already specifies a range of (municipal) interventions such as homeless shelters, supported housing, social support in own housing, social drop-in cafés, social contact persons and social substance use treatment.

One might expect to find a large number of civil organisations involved in the strategy process in Portugal, however, the majority of the stakeholders involved in setting up the strategy were public entities. An overview provided by Baptista (2009, p.63) shows the participation of very few private stakeholders (just 5 out of 22), with some higher representation in the core group. Baptista further emphasises that representation of private homeless service providers was not fully ensured in the process.

Filipovič-Hrast *et al.* (2009), discussing governance arrangements in implementing homelessness policy in Slovenia and Hungary, find significant differences between the two countries, which they ascribe to variations in the development of welfare services in general: 'Slovenia still follows a classic welfarism strategy path, where the public sector plays the main role in reducing social inequalities, while the third sector, whose role is small and largely complementary, bridges the gap. The system is governed hierarchically by public authorities, which finance public as well as third sector organisation' (p.118). A specific feature in both countries is the close and even symbiotic relations between the authorities and the NGOs, an organisational

structure frequently referred to as quangos³. The transition in Hungary led to strong decentralisation and the authors find that the welfare system is governed in a way that allows third sector organisations to participate in policy making. However, there are stronger connections between NGOs and the authorities in Hungary than one finds in the mature capitalist welfare states.

The organisational challenges for improving services and housing provision for the homeless are reflected not only in the overall responsibilities of stakeholders, but also in the barriers faced by service providers in their daily work. In most of the national strategies there is a focus on strengthening coordination and integration across services. Even in the Nordic countries, where municipalities are the main service providers, there are considerable internal organisational challenges to delivering services to homeless people whose complex support needs often require the cooperation of multiple services – not only housing and social support but also psychiatric and substance use treatment – and homeless people often face difficulties in utilising existing services.

Measurement

A measure of the effectiveness of homelessness interventions on an aggregate level is the number of homeless persons before and after the implementation of a strategy or programme. Strategies tend to have specific objectives, such as reducing the number of evictions, ending rough sleeping, reducing the use of shelters or temporary accommodation (see Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2009, tables). The extent of homelessness before and after a strategy period is one indicator of the degree of success or failure of the intervention methods, organisational arrangements, division of responsibilities and funding schemes, particularly if the measurement specifies different situations of homelessness (number of people sleeping rough, using hostels, etc.). However, as emphasised in the evaluation of the Norwegian strategy, which ended at the onset of the current financial and economic crisis, structural changes have to be taken into account when assessing the results (Dyb *et al.*, 2008). In this way, monitoring the outcomes of the national strategies raises the need to explain why the ambitious goals set out in the strategy are often not met when the strategy period comes to an end.

In some countries, progress in measurement preceded the formation of national strategies; whereas in others, the adoption of national strategies has facilitated progress in measurement (see Chapter 1). In the Scandinavian countries, the results of national counts informed the later formulating of national strategies, as

³ Various definitions: quasi non-governmental organisation, quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation, quasi-autonomous national government organisation.

knowledge of the extent and characteristics of homelessness was obtained on a national scale and homelessness was often given an 'official' and operational definition for the first time.

The national strategies of some countries involve a specific focus on the measurement of the effectiveness of intervention methods. In the UK, a comprehensive client registration system, with measures of outcomes, interventions and client characteristics, has been developed as part of the Supporting People programme. In the Danish strategy, outcome measurement takes place on two levels. On the aggregate level the development of the strategy's four goals (reduce rough sleeping, young people should not need to stay in a shelter, reduce long-term stays in shelters, and prevent homelessness upon institutional release) is measured through biannual national homelessness counts, combined with data from the national client registration system on homeless hostels. Targets on each outcome have been set at the municipal level. Outcomes of interventions are measured on an individual level, with the aim of testing how methods such as critical time intervention, case management and ACT teams work in a Danish context.

Agenda for Future Research

This review of the research literature on the formation and implementation of national homelessness strategies shows that comprehensive knowledge already exists about the content and priorities in the strategies. Differences in content reflect variations in the underlying welfare regimes and housing and social policies, but considerable variation also exists within welfare regimes. Similarities mainly exist in the types of intervention and the visible influence of the housing first paradigm. This research takes the nation state as the primary unit of analysis, or makes cross-country comparisons. However, as other chapters of this volume suggest, new groups of homeless people related to changing migration patterns across Europe may pose challenges to developing future homelessness strategies in a national framework.

The national focus is also challenged by changing modes of governance that involve an increased regionalisation and decentralisation of responsibilities. Evaluations of national strategies already show the considerable focus on issues of implementation at the local level (e.g. Dyb *et al.*, 2008). A comparative analysis across municipalities and cities of policies and their implementation may provide greater insight into the challenges of developing and implementing policies at the local level.

There is also a need for research on the effects of interventions. The focus on 'what works' has been incorporated into the frameworks of most national strategies, however, with a considerable variation in measurement of outcomes. So far the effects of interventions have mainly been tested systematically in the US. Obtaining more evidence on the effects of specific types of interventions in a European context would contribute to further policy development in the field of homelessness.

Homelessness transgressing the boundaries of the national welfare state

Inclusion of the central and eastern European countries in the EU has increased labour migration from these countries to western and northern Europe. Not all migrants are successful in finding work or sustaining employment, and some lose their employment for various reasons. There is very little knowledge about the connections between internal labour migration in the EU, social marginalisation and the consequences with respect to homelessness and housing conditions. Findings from an ongoing research project in Oslo show that the homeless persons among Polish migrants have little or no knowledge of the welfare system in Norway. The study further indicates that Polish migrants are excluded from low-threshold homelessness services, even if they are literally homeless (Mostowska, 2010). There is every reason to assume that exclusion from such services applies to other homeless migrant groups as well.

Migrants who are without legal employment or who are unemployed may find themselves in a precarious situation and, if not already homeless, may be at risk of experiencing homelessness. Their rights when out of work are not clear. They represent a challenge to the western and northern European welfare states. There is a need for more knowledge about homelessness among migrant workers, the profile of homelessness and experiences of migrant homeless people, as well as knowledge about how it is dealt with by host countries. What is the role of the welfare state in dealing with these new homeless groups? Are such groups included in homelessness strategies or other intervention programmes? Can any attempts to find solutions be identified at EU level? Is there a need to develop a European strategy against homelessness and what would the preconditions for such an ambition be?

The migration issue and the current financial and economic crisis show how structural conditions also affect homelessness and housing exclusion and operate on a level transgressing the boundaries of the nation state. The countries most affected are those with less developed homelessness policies and often with narrow definitions of homelessness, mirroring the 'classic vagrant', as described by Arapoglou (2004) in the case of Greece. Are these countries less likely than before the onset of the crisis to develop comprehensive schemes and strategies to alleviate homelessness and housing exclusion? Or will the crisis push forward more holistic approaches to homelessness?

Comparative research on local homelessness strategies and their implementation

Most of the countries that have adopted national strategies require local authorities to develop local homelessness strategies or plans on how to improve services and access to housing at the local level. The responsibilities given to local government also involve including local stakeholders, whether these are NGOs or municipal services. Success or failure in meeting goals set at the national level will be determined by the complex interplay of responsibilities, resources, organisation and social practices at the local level, including the structural context of the availability of affordable housing.

In the light of previous research on national strategies, we point to the need for analysis at the local level, with a comparative focus. Much can be learned by comparing across countries how municipalities, cities and even metropolitan districts (such as in the case of Oslo) tackle the challenges of reaching the goals set out in national strategies and putting new policies into practice. A further important question that needs to be addressed is how the provision of housing is managed locally. The issue of housing provision is not always sufficiently addressed in the national strategies. What allocation schemes exist locally to provide permanent housing for the homeless? How are the often conflicting goals of local housing policies met (e.g. securing social mix in socially challenged neighbourhoods and providing housing for marginal groups)? (see Busch-Geertsema, 2007) Do the national strategies provide new opportunities for municipalities to address the housing needs of the homeless?

Another issue concerns the provision of specialised housing for homeless people with special care needs. How is the provision of specialised housing governed by national legislation? Does a scope for discretion in social work and variation in resources create differences among municipalities in service levels? How is specialised supported accommodation provided at the local level? Is floating support given in individual housing or does the supply of supported accommodation rely on category housing with attached services involved?

Also, the issue of organising complex interventions is a local challenge. How are problems of coordination among different service providers and institutional systems – social services, health services, criminal services, housing authorities, etc. – tackled locally? Do the national strategies provide new initiatives for handling such issues? Are new requirements set in the case of people leaving institutions such as hostels, hospitals or prisons? Are services for the homeless integrated into mainstream social services or are there parallel support systems?

Does the extent of municipal responsibilities make a difference? How do the national strategies deal with such issues – and what lessons can be learned from comparative research at the local level?

Knowledge of the effects of interventions in a European context: can national strategies pave the way?

The content of the national homelessness strategies indicates the considerable influence of the housing first approach on the development of interventions. In the international research literature a substantial body of randomised effect studies points to the effectiveness of providing permanent housing solutions with the necessary social support. Almost all such randomised trials have been conducted in the US. A substantial challenge is to obtain more evidence-based knowledge on the effects of such interventions in a European context and in the often different welfare environments in European countries compared with the US.

There is a need to examine more critically the types of intervention that are established under the national strategies. Do interventions always follow the housing first principle? What are the relevant criteria for a housing intervention to follow the housing first principle? Are there housing interventions labelled as housing first that do not really fulfil such criteria? How is the ambition to establish early permanent housing solutions tackled for those who are not able to live in ordinary housing? And how is this group identified? Are the pitfalls of the staircase approach actually avoided? And following the perspective on local implementation processes, are there modes of practice in service provision and the administration of services that pose barriers to implementing the housing first principle?

Given the challenge of identifying what types of intervention there actually are, there is a general need for more documentation of outcomes, not only at the aggregate level but also at the individual level. Such documentation of interventions and their outcomes is a central element of some strategies, most notably in the UK and Denmark, and should provide more knowledge on the effectiveness of particular intervention methods at the level of the individual. The documentation of outcomes within the European strategies takes the form of before and after measurement of individuals in the course of receiving the interventions prescribed in the strategies. Selection effects on individuals are taken into consideration by registering characteristics such as substance abuse, mental illness and other individual vulnerabilities, but randomised studies are not (yet) the plan of any programme.

A remaining challenge is to advance to the next step on the ladder of evidence, from before and after measurements to performing a control for selection effects through randomised studies, as this gives the strongest evidence of whether the effect is actually due to the intervention or whether other factors such as heterogeneity among intervention groups or cream-skimming (i.e. an intervention scheme or service choosing the 'most suitable client') can explain some of the effect. If evidence shows that particular interventions are effective in bringing individuals out of homelessness, then such evidence is a powerful argument for providing these interventions to homeless people. Such studies have been conducted for many years in the US and there is a need to carry out such research in Europe.

There can be considerable barriers to conducting randomised effect studies. Relatively specified interventions are already in place in national legislation in some countries and random assignment to interventions can run against the principle of needs-based assignment. A way of ensuring that no homeless individual is assigned to 'no treatment' due to an experiment is to make sure that such experiments focus on testing two or more interventions about which there are expectations of a positive effect (e.g. case management and ACT).

The most obvious barrier to such randomised experiments is that they are expensive to conduct as they involve the costs of research and of providing the interventions to be tested. Furthermore, any effect study involves a wide range of practical challenges. The relatively comprehensive framework of the national strategies could potentially facilitate such experiments. In this way we argue not only for more research on various aspects of national homelessness strategies but also that research on effects of interventions should be part of the national strategy programmes.

Conclusion

This review of research on national strategies shows that similarities and differences have already been identified. An important explanatory condition is the national welfare state context, but research has also shown that the relationship between the type of welfare state, the characteristics of national strategies and the contextual explanatory factors is not a simple one. Analysis of the complex relations among structural factors, housing systems and social services provision must be sensitive to national variations not only between but also within particular welfare regimes, as research on the Scandinavian countries clearly suggests. Also, the formation of strategies in a few southern and eastern European countries shows how analysis must take specific factors into account, including an understanding of transformations in the role of the state in the provision of welfare services, in particular for marginal groups.

The spread of the housing first paradigm is evident in almost all national strategies. The challenge remains to gain more knowledge of the actual characteristics of the interventions facilitated by the strategies. Are the ambitions of providing early permanent housing interventions along with individually tailored support actually met or is housing first merely a fashionable label? Strategies with comprehensive measurement components should provide much-needed insight into the effects of different intervention methods in the European context.

Comparative analyses focusing on local processes of service provision and on the challenges of implementation and organisation may provide new insights into the complex relationship between welfare regimes, housing systems and social service provision (e.g. the role of local authorities). Important developments on a European scale, such as migration patterns and the financial and economic crisis, also call for attention in research on how phenomena that transgress the boundaries of the nation state, and that have potentially severe consequences for the homeless, are dealt with at national and European levels.

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