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# Preparing or Postponing?

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## Introduction

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FOR-HOME is a large, thorough longitudinal investigation of re-housing outcomes for 400 previously homeless, single people, who were interviewed face-to-face at three different occasions, each lasting 1–2 hours; just before they moved into their new homes, after six months, and then again after 15 or 18 months of independent living. As the attrition rate was very low, this adds up to about 1 700 hours of semi-structured interviews with re-housed individuals, in addition to information gathered from six service provider organisations operating the temporary accommodation from which the homeless interviewees moved to independent housing. The article under review only makes use of some quantifiable data gathered in the study. However, a comprehensive report on the FOR-HOME study was published in 2011 (Crane *et al*, 2011), and another article focusing on financial difficulties and advice needs was published in the *European Journal of Homelessness* in 2010 (Warnes *et al*, 2010).

The overall results of FOR-HOME are impressive at first glance, with 78 per cent of formerly homeless people retaining their housing at the time of the last interview, which is comparable to Pathways to Housing’s evaluations of their Housing First programmes (Tsemberis, 2010). However, Crane *et al* (2012) make the case for a Housing Ready approach to homelessness, claiming that a long stay in temporary accommodation is decisive for successful re-housing – a result that has not been reported or even suggested in their two other publications.

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## The Sample

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The participants in the study were selected and contacted by staff in the participating service providers from clients/residents moving into regular housing, with the objective of making their sample representative in terms of age, sex and ethnicity, of single homeless people being re-housed by these organisations in the study sites during 2007–08. It is, accordingly, not representative of all homeless

people, nor for all those staying in temporary accommodation in these sites or in the country. As the authors note, 'only 20 percent of departures from London's hostels in 2008/2009 were into independent accommodation, while 39 percent were evictions or abandonments' (Crane *et al*, 2012, p.23). This is a well-known problem with the practice of preparing people for housing, which forms the basis of housing-ready or staircase approaches, and with evaluating its outcomes. That is, most users fail to achieve permanent housing; rather they are excluded or give up before they get the opportunity. If data are used for a comparison with Housing First projects, which is suggested in the article, then arguably only 78 per cent of 20 percent, or 15 per cent of those moving from staircase like accommodation actually lead to successful permanent housing. Accordingly, the good results say very little about the usefulness of temporary accommodation in general, as they only refer to the minority of the residents that are offered permanent housing. Put differently, the study group represents only those 20 per cent who have been selected by the service provider or local authority as definitely or probably ready for living independently (except for 5 per cent about whom the staff had doubts).

We do not learn very much about the problems of these re-housed persons. We are informed that 50 per cent had mental health problems, 13 per cent drank heavily and 30 per cent used illicit drugs (Crane *et al*, 2012, p.26). But we do not know if this means that 50 per cent had no such problems and 30 per cent had two or three of them, or that almost all had at least one of these problems and none had two or more of them. If the respondents had been grouped into different categories on the basis of their self-reported problems (and their new housing, see below) to form a typology, it might have been easier to understand and make sense of the results.

## Results

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### *Explaining success*

The bivariate analysis indicates that many factors that are traditionally associated with a risk of housing exclusion are not negatively correlated with housing retention (Crane *et al*, 2012, Table 3, p.32). These include never having lived alone before, or having experienced difficulties while doing so, mental health problems and alcohol misuse, while specific experiences of homelessness (having slept rough, duration of last homelessness period and where it was spent), are claimed to have such an impact. Furthermore, the authors do not find that various treatment and training activities, except for, possibly, training on paying bills, have any significant impact. These results are intriguing, since they are at odds with a commonsensical approach that suggests that non-conforming lifestyles and behaviour, and acculturation into homelessness, can make re-housing difficult.

The authors make a point of the fact that 89 per cent of those 65 per cent (260) of users whom the staff found ‘definitely ready’ succeeded in their housing, while this held for only 9 (53 per cent) of the 17 people about whom the staff was ‘doubtful’ (*ibid.*, p.30, 33). But this still leaves more failures in absolute figures (29) among those declared ‘definitely ready’ than among the ‘doubtful’ cases (8). In fact most of the ‘doubtful’ cases did succeed, which highlights the difficulty of predicting housing retention on the basis of homeless people’s behaviour in congregate settings such as hostels and shelters.

The authors’ main conclusion is that a long stay – two or three years – in temporary accommodation before resettlement in independent living assists in securing successful re-housing. All individuals in the study with such a long ‘preparation period’ (n=52) had retained their flats at the time of the last interview, while this held for only two thirds of those with only up to three months in temporary accommodation (n=46) before moving into an own flat. In the stepwise multiple regression (with ‘remained housed’ as the dependent variable) presented in Table 5 (*ibid.*, p.34) ‘in hostel/supported housing >6 months’ and ‘in semi-independent accommodation’ are shown to have an independent positive impact, while ‘slept rough during preceding 12 months’ and ‘using illegal drugs’ have a negative influence on the outcome. In the regression including only those who had not lived successfully alone before, the same factors had a positive impact, as did ‘training on paying bills’, while no factor had a significant negative impact. It is claimed that all factors that were correlated with the re-housing outcome in the bivariate analyses were entered into the regression but ‘current homeless episode >24 months’, and ‘engaged in education, work-training or employment at time for resettlement’ were not retained in any of the regressions, while ‘training on paying bills’ was not retained in the total population analysis, and ‘using illegal drugs at resettlement’ was not in the regression concerning those who had no previous successful time of living alone.

We are further informed that these regression analyses predict a majority of the cases still in housing (96 and 95 per cent, respectively), but only a minority (23 and 44 per cent, respectively) of those without tenancy at 15/18 months. Thus, could it be that the regressions only characterise the sample in general? According to Tables 3 and 4 (*ibid.*, p. 32), most (60 per cent) of those who had slept rough in the last year and two thirds of those with only 3 months or less in temporary accommodation were actually still housed at 15/18 months, while 40 per cent of those who had lost their tenancy had been trained on paying bills. In the report training on bills paying was played down: ‘There were no associations between receiving advice or training on budgeting and paying bills from key-workers or other staff before being rehoused and coping financially after moving’ (Crane *et al*, 2011, p.55–56).

Furthermore, no analysis is presented in the article on possible different success rates for different training and resettlement programmes run by different organisations and/or in different cities.

### ***Explaining failure***

Obviously, all relevant causal variables have not been entered into the regression analyses in the article (Crane *et al*, 2012). Factors or considerations that might have caused housing exclusion or abandonment are excluded from *this* analysis e.g., whether or not the re-housed people were offered support in their permanent housing. If good preparation indeed predicts housing sustainability, what if this kind of support were instead provided on a voluntary basis immediately upon re-housing and when real bills, housework and neighbour difficulties appear and need to be solved? The importance of tenant support is not mentioned in the article, but was underlined in the report:

There was a relationship between contact with a TS [tenant support] worker and rent arrears. The respondents who still had a TS worker at 15/18 months were less likely to have had rent arrears during the previous 9/12 months ( $p < 0.05$ ), less likely to have arrears when interviewed ( $p < 0.05$ ), and less likely to have been taken to court for arrears. (Crane *et al*, 2011, p.84)

Somewhat unexpectedly, neither alcohol misuse nor mental health symptoms had an impact on the housing outcomes, which suggests that tenant behaviour is not the only reason for housing exclusion. Unfortunately, the reasons for failure are not detailed in the article, although much interesting information is probably found in the interviews, and is related in the report. The article simply states: 'Some had been evicted because of rent arrears or antisocial behaviour associated with alcohol or drug misuse, and several had abandoned the property because of harassment from local people or because they were depressed, lonely and unable to cope.' (Crane *et al*, 2012, p. 31). References to 'some', 'several', and housing loss because of this 'or' that are not very enlightening. Again, more detailed information is found in the report: 'Overall, 26 per cent of the respondents were threatened with eviction because of rent arrears, and 21 (6 per cent) were evicted or left their accommodation for this reason' (Crane *et al*, 2011, p.55).

Importantly, information on housing characteristics is completely left out of the article. Differences in the assigned flats, i.e., the site, standard, rent, tenure, and the properties of the neighbourhood etc. could possibly contribute to an explanation of why some people abandoned their flats, could not pay the rent, were harassed or attracted complaints by neighbours. In the full report, however, such factors are given much attention:

The presented results, along with many other analyses, lead to the overall assessment that three sets of factors had the strongest influence on the housing outcomes, namely tenure differences, the partly associated differences in housing market or structural conditions in London and in the provincial cities, and the age of the respondents (*ibid.*, p.50).

In the report the often poor physical quality of private rental flats and their high rents and insecure tenure are highlighted: 'The evictees represented 16 per cent of private-rented tenants but only two per cent of social housing tenants' (*ibid.* p.55). Crane *et al* (2012) go on to state:

The respondents who moved to private-rented accommodation were significantly more likely to have moved or left ( $p < 0.001$ ). At 15/18 months, less than one-half (47 percent) of private renters compared to more than four-fifths of social housing tenants were still in the resettlement accommodation (Figure 7.1). Just over one-quarter (27 percent) of those resettled into private-rented accommodation were without a tenancy – and 12 per cent had returned to a hostel or slept rough (the equivalent figure for social housing tenants was 5 percent). (*ibid.*, p.45)

Poverty is another factor that is touched upon but not elaborated in the 2012 article, although financial problems are singled out as a great cause of housing failure. 'People who had rent arrears from their pre-resettlement accommodation were more likely to default on rent when re-housed, suggesting that more needs to be done by homelessness sector organisations to address persistent rent default patterns.' (Crane *et al* 2012, p.36). However, the persistent rent default pattern does not have to be attributable to *the individual*. An alternative explanation would be that paying off rent debts at the same time as paying current rent may put too much strain on the re-housed individual's finances, or that higher rents increase the risk for rent arrears if the income remains low, that is, poverty (cf Warnes *et al*, 2010).

## Conclusion

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The article ends with a plea for enhanced services over a considerable period to fully prepare homeless people for independent living. The authors conclude that 'the longer (up to three years) a homeless person spends in supported accommodation, the greater is his or her preparedness for independent living' (Crane *et al*, 2012, p.34). Of course this cannot refer to people in general, most of whom have never been in supported accommodation before moving into a new home but still manage to keep it, so an underlying assumption is that homeless people are different from 'normal' ones. We have also learned from the study that different kinds of training and treatment do not have any independent impact on the housing

outcomes. But then what remains in the black box of 'preparation' that causes successful re-housing? Is it only discipline, that is, having learnt to comply with hostel rules to avoid exclusion during the last six or twelve months? Or is it a humble attitude, implying remaining content with temporary accommodation as well as deficient re-housing offers and refraining from deserting them?

The authors have different suggestions: For example, that it takes time to solve problems related to housing sustainment; participation in training programmes (although this was not supported by the analysis); a selection effect in that homeless people with chaotic lifestyles tend to lose their housing (although alcohol and mental health problems had no independent impact on retained housing); or being involved in education or work training (but this had no impact in the regression analysis). Having resided in semi-independent housing is another explanation put forward by the authors, but this too could be a selection effect, since we do not know whether such accommodation is offered first to those that need it most, or on the contrary to those with only minor problems.

The very rich data collected in FOR-HOME can obviously be used in various combinations in different kinds of analysis. In their 2012 *European Journal of Homelessness* article, the authors have obviously directed their interest towards the usefulness of temporary and supported accommodation prior to re-housing and conclude that such accommodation is beneficial for homeless people. However, since most residents are probably not offered permanent housing, even after two-three years in temporary accommodation, and their destinies are not discussed, the implied picture of the system's functions is inadequate. In addition, possible alternative causes of failure to keep stable housing (except having slept rough or only a short stay in temporary accommodation) that were presented as evidenced in the authors' 2011 report, such as high rents, bad housing quality, and insecure tenure in the private rental sector, are left out in the analyses of the 2012 article. For these reasons, the article fails to convince this reader of its conclusions.

**› References**

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