

Y-Foundation (2017)

A Home of Your Own: Housing First and Ending Homelessness in Finland

Keuruu: Otava Book Printing, pp.127, available:

https://ysaatio.fi/assets/files/2018/01/A_Home_of_Your_Own_lowres_spreads.pdf

As a faculty member at a school of social work, an important part of my job is to teach courses in social welfare policy to students pursuing Masters of Social Work degrees. A constant challenge I face in teaching these courses is to find ways to make the policy process feel accessible to my students, the majority of whom are interested in becoming clinical social workers and have little prior exposure to the world of policy analysis. My students tend to have a lukewarm (or worse) response to the typical policy reports. Many such documents tend to be overly dense and technical, and also contain enough bar charts and data tables to overwhelm most readers. As just one relevant example, the most recent version of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress contained, by my count, more than 70 tables and charts over the course of only 76 pages.

It was therefore somewhat refreshing to read *A Home of Your Own: Housing First and Ending Homelessness in Finland*, a book that takes an entirely different approach to telling the story of the development, implementation, and impact of a national policy initiative. Although the success of Finland's national strategy to address homelessness is already widely known in certain circles (among others, Nicholas Pleace wrote about the Finnish approach in the [September 2017 issue of this journal](#)), *A Home of Your Own* packages this story in a way that will be appealing to a wide range of new audiences. The book's magazine-like layout, which makes heavy use of callout boxes, photographs, personal narratives, and even floor plans of supported housing units helps to make it an informative, highly accessible and relatively quick read. Authored by the Y-Foundation, a non-profit that was a key partner in the development of Finland's national strategy, the main text of the book is comprised of nine brisk chapters spread across less than 100 pages. Given its format and length, I can imagine giving this book to students, relatives, friends or other colleagues who have little knowledge of policy or homelessness with the

confidence that they would be able to come back in just a few hours newly endowed with a fairly firm, albeit broad, understanding of how Finland has gone about tackling homelessness.

In terms of its structure and substantive content, the book starts with two chapters that provide context on the “why” and “how” Finland has gone about pursuing a coordinated national response to homelessness. These chapters trace Finland’s shift from a reliance on the staircase model as its preferred approach to homelessness to the implementation in 2008 of a national strategy to reduce long-term homelessness in which the Housing First model served as the foundation. What jumps out in these chapters is that the success of this national strategy (initially known as Paavo I, and subsequently updated with Paavo II in 2012) was rooted in the involvement of stakeholders from multiple sectors in its development and in the tailoring of the Housing First model to the existing contours of the Finnish social welfare state. This latter point raises the question of whether countries with a less robust system of social protection are likely to face significant barriers in replicating the Finnish approach at an equally large scale. I found myself wondering what the authors thought about this question, but it remains regrettably unanswered both in these chapters and in the book as a whole.

Having provided the necessary background, Chapters 3 to 8 then detail the implementation of this plan from several different angles. Chapter 3 describes how the plan required a shift in both the philosophy and practices of actors across multiple sectors, including national and municipal government officials, non-profit service providers and formerly homeless residents in supported housing. The importance of involving multiple sectors crops up again in Chapter 6, which explains how the collaboration of actors from all of these sectors was crucial for the success of the plan in producing 1,250 new housing opportunities and achieving a 35% reduction in long-term homelessness between 2008 and 2015. Of particular interest in this chapter is the account of the role that “experts by experience” (i.e. persons with lived experience of homelessness) played in the development and implementation of Finland’s national strategy. There is impressively broad thinking on display about the role that such experts by experience can and do play at multiple levels.

Chapter 4 takes readers inside two congregate supported housing programs developed through the national plan and thus provides an up-close and in-depth portrait of what Housing First looks like in the Finnish context. The personal narratives of residents living in these developments are the most compelling part of this chapter and make for the most impactful reading in the entire book. As an American reader, I found the story of one resident, an American expat who became homeless in Finland after his business fell on hard times, to be an interesting, albeit discouraging lens through which to view my own country’s orientation towards providing

social protection to vulnerable individuals. Indeed, providing permanent, government-funded housing to an American immigrant in need appears to be entirely non-controversial in the Finnish context, a stark contrast to the current situation in the United States where ascendant political forces are aggressively pursuing the passage of policies that would deny immigrants even the most basic safety net protections.

The final two chapters of the book (Chapters 8 and 9) are more forward looking and make it clear that authorities in Finland are not satisfied simply with making substantial progress in reducing long-term homelessness. Chapter 8 details the shift in the Finnish strategy towards an increasing emphasis on homelessness prevention. Building on the success of its earlier Paavo I and Paavo II plans, the Finnish implemented the Action Plan for Preventing Homelessness in Finland in 2016, which will guide the country's approach to homelessness through 2019. Chapter 8 briefly describes the wide range of strategies that are being developed and implemented by this plan and readers are likely to zero in on those strategies that align closely with their interests. For example, I found the idea of developing "housing social work" as a new area of practice that will be integrated into social and human services training curricula to be highly intriguing and one that social work education in the United States would do well to adopt. The final chapter of the book (Chapter 9) touches briefly on emerging challenges that will affect efforts to address homelessness in Finland, not the least of which is impending structural reforms to the administration and organization of social and health services.

As a whole, *A Home of Your Own* is likely to be most appealing to those readers interested in the 30,000-foot view of how Finland has achieved impressive results in reducing homelessness. For those who want more of the nitty-gritty details or who are looking for a more traditional and in-depth policy analysis, this book is likely to leave you wanting. Indeed, one criticism I had of *A Home of Your Own*, is that I frequently found myself wanting more information than the book provided about the many policy decisions, service models, funding mechanisms or historical developments that the book mentions. I also wondered whether there had been any rigorous empirical evaluation of the impact of the Finnish approach. Along the same lines, while the book does mention some of the challenges to the successful implementation of Finland's strategy, one wishes the story had been told through a lens that was a bit more critical. Surely there were some more bumps in the road than readers are let in on. However, this critique is admittedly rooted in my own particular bias, and so it is perhaps more fair to offer this point as a caution to potential readers who may be hoping for a book that is more in the traditional academic mould.

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All the same, the authors of *A Home of your Own* have done a commendable job in putting together a book that is ambitious without trying to do too much, informative without being overly complicated, and accessible without being over simplified. This makes for a winning formula and book that is overall successful in what it sets out to achieve.

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