

Y-Foundation (2019)

***Homelessness in 2030:  
Essays on Possible Futures***

Helsinki: Y-Foundation

If, thirty years ago when widespread homelessness was first emerging in Global North nations, we had known what we know now, what would we have done? If we had known that people would be sleeping on the streets of major cities, if we had known that there would be intergenerational homelessness among families, if we had known that people ill with behavioural and physical health disorders would spend years living in hostels and shelters and die decades earlier than their housed peers, would we have done things differently? Would we have invested more in affordable housing, changed our immigration policies, beefed up welfare, better supported children, and expanded human rights? Or, would we have allowed events, the market and political dynamics to run their course?

**Homelessness 2030** is a thought-provoking collection of essays on what homelessness *might* look like ten years from now -- and what will have gotten us there. The authors are all people with extensive knowledge of homelessness, both historical and contemporary. They have years of experience researching the issue and developing policies and practices to solve it. And in **Homelessness 2030**, they give us, if not every possible eventuality as to where we will be on homelessness ten years from now, plenty of food for thought about what could be done now to either achieve or prevent their visions of the future.

The book is broken down by hopeful and dystopian visions, individual national perspectives and models and policies for change. In the essays that focus on a future in which homelessness declines or disappears, the authors offer a range of ideas – some more practical than others. If, for example, nations have leadership that is committed to solving the problem and a strategic plan to get there; dedicate adequate resources; use data to measure both what works and what progress is being made; target prevention and assistance effectively; and use only evidence-based practices, then yes, homelessness can be ended. Others see the answer as lying more in the achievement of justice and human rights. If there is an adequate

supply of affordable housing; a just society in which poverty and homelessness are not criminalized; a guaranteed income for everyone; and if people can get all the services they need, then again, homelessness can be ended.

On the other hand, things could go poorly in the future. National disputes, border-tightening, anti-migration and -immigration forces, xenophobia, and changing economics could undermine social supports. If governments are diverted to wars or shift to authoritarian as opposed to progressive political systems; if there are serious financial crises and the market is relied upon to address social problems and supply housing; and if aggressive policing rather than services becomes the primary approach to homelessness, things will go poorly for low income people. It is possible, in such scenarios, that homelessness will go down, as people without regular housing are deported, arrested, conscripted or the like. But certainly, that will not be ending homelessness in the way we all desire.

The authors point out a host of other interconnected things that are known to end homelessness and, if implemented now, would reduce numbers. Housing First (providing housing without pre-conditions) is cited repeatedly and implementing both the specific practice and the general approach of Housing First are thought to be necessities for reducing homelessness in the future. There is a lot of discussion of preventing homelessness, either through a robust economic and social support system for all lower income people, or through a more targeted approach that would only be accurate with more research. Demographic issues such as the aging of the homeless population will have to be taken into account, as they will necessitate different housing and service strategies. Many authors noted that the supply of social housing, which is dwindling most places, will have to be significantly increased.

There were a few things affecting homelessness that were less frequently mentioned. One was employment. Housing affordability is a combination of the cost of the housing and people's incomes. Rents may go up, but if incomes increase commensurately, housing remains affordable. In much of the world, that income will have to come from employment. The authors discuss income benefits, but few recommend employment strategies. Mentions of climate change were surprisingly infrequent. Climate-related movements of people and loss of housing supply may occur because of coastal flooding, fires, and shifts in industry and agriculture. All of those would impact homelessness. While there was a general call for more services and treatment, there was little emphasis on the role of the health care sector. Particularly where there is unsheltered homelessness and as the population ages, homelessness becomes a significant public health issue with major cost implications. The health care sector could be a major player in solutions to homelessness moving forward.

It must also be said that the most common suggestion was to do what Finland does.

I would not quibble with the advisability of making many of changes that the authors of these papers suggest and of struggling at all costs to avoid the dystopian disasters they describe. Many prescribe the need for comprehensive and systemic across-the-board changes; undoubtedly these would be effective. I cannot help but reflect, however, that in the United States at least, widespread homelessness is a relatively new phenomenon in the modern era, having emerged only in the early 1980s. The period prior to that could by no means be characterized as perfect: there was poverty, inequality, racism, police violence, poor health and behavioural health treatment, veteran issues and other problems. Justice was imperfect, and only a sparse menu of rights and benefits was available to poor people. One thing we did not have, however, was a shortage of affordable housing. We had enough affordable housing. And we did not have homelessness. Perhaps the smartest thing we could do over the next ten years would be to concentrate on this one solution.

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