Review Symposium

Mike Allen, Lars Benjaminsen, Eoin O'Sullivan and Nicholas Pleace (2020)

Ending Homelessness? The contrasting experiences of Denmark, Finland and Ireland

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The title of the book *Ending Homelessness?* ends with an intriguing question mark, thus opening up the possibility of pursuing this aim, yet instilling doubt with regard to the effectiveness of the affirmation. Thinking the unthinkable has actually constituted the mainstream in policy against homelessness in the last ten years. Could it really be possible to end homelessness? What are the more forceful strategies? What can be learned from those European countries which have adopted policies seeking to end homelessness? The book aims to provide answers to these questions through the exploration of the different (and contrasting) experiences of Denmark, Finland, and Ireland.

Outstanding scholars and field researchers in the study of homelessness in Europe offer a deep understanding of policy strategies, data comparability, and general political scenarios in which this shift toward ending homelessness has developed in three small European countries. Further, they advance some possible explanations about the different results obtained. As a matter of fact, the three countries offer quite different outcomes despite similar starting points. While Finland has recently declared to have reached a state of "zero" homelessness, Ireland and Denmark still face an increase, especially among the low-income household and the young populations.

The core idea of the book, to understand the reasons for such different results, is developed through seven chapters. Starting from the change in policy regarding the management and understanding of the dynamics of homelessness, the discourse progresses with the emergence of "Housing First" and the focus on housing as a human right (Chapter 1). It ends with the final chapter concerning the lessons learned from the different countries; underlining the efficacy of housing-led

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policies, the strategic relevance in granting affordable and secure housing for lower-income households and, finally, that the cuts in public housing seem to have the greatest effect on homelessness, even more than the economic crisis.

The central part of the book offers a detailed – at times excessively – reconstruction of every country's policy, the evolution of each strategy through time, the assumptions about the phenomenon, and the way in which it is measured in each of the three countries. Chapter 2 concerns the evolution of homeless policies in the selected countries and the changes brought about in the policy approaches, progressively focusing on the goal of ending homelessness. Chapter 3 gives a deeper insight into the different strategies both in terms of the money invested and of the management structure of the services and the policies implemented. Chapter 4 analyses the variety of methodologies used in the different countries and the kind of data produced.

The last two chapters of the proposed comparative analysis are the most interesting and are focused on "explanations". Chapter 5 argues the relevance of "securing affordable housing and the targeting of those experiencing homelessness" (p.136) in successfully eradicating the most intense expression of the phenomenon. This may be considered obvious, especially in light of the emerging evidence obtained by "Housing First", but the explanation given problematises the original model and highlights the relevance of a more orchestrated, housing-led political strategy, such as in the Finnish approach. Along this line it is interesting to follow the public debate in Finland concerning the critiques received after implementing a different model, and the criticism of the American Housing First, both in terms of the definition of people experiencing homelessness and also with regard to the cultural scenario in which this model was generated. The authors clearly affirm that the effectiveness of "Housing First" is related to the availability of public housing, while the failure of the Irish strategy can be related to the fact that "utilizing the stock of the private rented sector is critical in preventing and responding to homelessness…" (p.135).

Chapter 6 offers a few (rather meagre) insights about the welfare regime and the kind of homelessness experienced, but more interestingly focuses on the cuts of welfare programmes implemented in all countries, enhancing the shift toward labour market activation policies, and the restructuring processes that focus on the exclusion of migrants or non-nationals. One of most interesting points that I strongly hope could be further developed in other studies concerns the "political and administrative decision-making structure" (pp.146-155) in which the local and national administrations responsible for the head-counting and the implementation policies are considered strategic and determinant factors for the different registered outcomes.

Methodologically, the book is a perfect example of a case-oriented study on comparative research in the field of social policy. In many studies and consequent publications, the main approach to the study of homelessness has been cross-sectional or longitudinal, focusing on people who were sheltered or without a roof at a specific time and place. This perspective has been widely used and overestimated in the study of homelessness, denying the relevance of a more complex understanding. The results of many cross-sectional studies have been used as a base for policy design and have produced simplified descriptions of people experiencing homelessness, therefore promoting a misleading picture of the phenomenon based on individual characteristics.

From a methodological perspective, this book constitutes an accurate example of what comparative research can offer to scientific knowledge and public debate. The case-oriented approach can be extremely useful in understanding differences in policy implementation and cultivating deeper knowledge on mechanisms and outcomes. This approach obviously differs from the logic of evidence-based studies and recalls the sociological, re-constructive attempt to policy analysis and outcomes that is not merely focused on head-counting and individual evaluations. This kind of case-oriented analysis is essential in social policy and especially in the study of homelessness because of the complexity of the phenomena and the simplification that is usually pursued in dealing with it; “in its simple manifestation, homelessness is a serial victim of big and simplistic solutions (…) HF may become just the latest of these total solutions” (p.176). I wholly share the authors’ view on this point as well as the statement that “affordable housing supply has to be the core of any effective homeless strategy” (p.163).

Naturally, the availability of data is a pre-condition for all analyses. Especially when considering a comparative study, the data also have to be comparable. However, this is, unfortunately, not such a common feature in the estimation of homelessness and national data collection. To this end, the three chosen countries have a similar population size and have published detailed data, making the comparison sufficiently consistent. It may not be as easy to find other comparable countries, nevertheless, data collection on homelessness and the reference to the ETHOS classification system is in continuous expansion all over Europe, thus enhancing the comparability of data among countries. Hopefully more examples of this comparative approach will be available in the near future.

The book is clearly written and offers the reader a deep understanding of the various factors and possible explanations of such different results in the three European countries. For all of these reasons, the book addresses both scholars and students interested in the study of homelessness, in social policy analysis, and in policy evaluation. The lessons to be shared are strongly linked to the necessity

of a deeper understanding of the causes of homelessness in national contexts, as well as to the availability of data while, on the other hand, they strongly support the offer of preventive service and of skilled public servants to be implemented in a long-term strategy alongside the supply of affordable public housing.

Ending homelessness may therefore be considered possible!

Teresa Consoli
University of Catania, Italy

On Counting, Accounting and Accountability

I have read this book with great interest and appreciate the analysis, which is at the same time comprehensive and concrete. The authors have managed to strike a balance between adequate country narratives and potentially generalising conclusions, which is a difficult thing, especially when data were not originally gathered for comparison. Many readers will probably relate observations and inferences to their knowledge about the development of homelessness and possible strategies against it in their own countries. I assume that this is one of the purposes of this book and the idea to invite researchers from other countries to comment on the text, and I am grateful for this opportunity to present some questions and reflections.

Put extremely shortly, the book compares the national homeless strategies and their outcomes in three European countries: Finland, Denmark and Ireland. They share in common that they in 2008 adopted national strategies to end homelessness – especially the need for emergency accommodation – through providing permanent housing primarily to rough-sleepers and long-term shelter users. All three countries included Housing First programmes in their strategies, although only in Finland as a comprehensive strategy, which differed from the Pathways to Housing-model. All three countries also suffered from the global financial crisis in 2008, but only Ireland found itself in such a difficult situation that it had to comply with loan conditions determined by institutions like the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund – including to stop producing more social housing (p.59).

Significantly, of the three countries only Finland managed to reduce – if not fully end – homelessness. In Denmark, numbers remained at approximately the same or a somewhat higher level, but in Ireland homelessness grew substantially in the decade following the launching of the strategy. The authors discuss the strategies and their different outcomes and in searching for explanations, they involve analyses of housing markets, housing policies and welfare systems.

In the comments that follow I will start with a discussion on methodology and some of the authors' more or less implicit theories and assumptions and suggest a few alternative accounts. These have been triggered by my reading of the text but also convey my personal hang-ups in homelessness research. They include the power of markets and states, images of homeless people, and the interrelated problems of housing allocation, obligations and rights.

Methodological Reflections

Homelessness research is often associated with evaluations of strategies and projects, since funding of critical studies of 'business as usual' is rare. However, if the research question is whether or not specific measures and initiatives were successful or not, this entails certain limitations. First, in evaluations the initiatives

often determine the time span under scrutiny and to be able to guide further actions or policy revisions they must be completed soon after the programmes' ending. This makes it difficult to study long-term consequences. Secondly, a study of the development of the problem (here: homelessness) through evaluating measures against it implies that the targeted activities are highlighted as possible causes of wanted effects. Furthermore, subordinate objectives of the programmes, for example management, cooperation and funding vs costs are focused as well. The theory is so to speak already implied in the action plan. *Ending Homelessness?* does not suffer from these risks directly, but it may do indirectly, since a great deal of its empirical material seems to be gathered through strategy evaluations. Accordingly, the change in homelessness numbers is related to the project/strategy at stake; reduced homelessness in Finland is attributed to the national Housing First strategy, while non-change in homeless numbers in Denmark, as well as their increase in Ireland, are claimed to be due to obstacles for implementing the national strategies. Fortunately, the book exceeds these evaluation limits through also searching for explanations outside and beyond the strategies.

A related reflection is the differences between studying problem growth and problem decline. Difficulties to get funding for research into problems apart from evaluations are even greater when problems are declining. Still, I imagine that there is a lot of knowledge to gain in observing how and why problems such as homelessness decrease, possibly without any specific actions taken against it. How come that some countries (or regions or municipalities) or periods of time do not experience homelessness, sometimes even though the demand for housing exceeds the supply? Why did Finland's homelessness decrease before the national strategy of 2008? And are there political and professional mechanisms at play that "regulate" the size of a social problem so that national rates of homelessness (or unemployment or receipt of maintenance support) remain within certain frames? Are there stake-holders that have an interest in that problems are not completely solved, for instance to keep up the demand for housing, or the fear of evictions?

The *service-statistics paradox* is another methodological problem, in the book possibly relevant for the case of Ireland (see, e.g., p.42). In the comparative study of homelessness in Europe (FEANTSA 1999) and across the world by UN-Habitat (2000), this phenomenon is part of the explanation why countries with well-developed services often present higher levels of homelessness than do nations that lack such resources. "As long as most of the data on homelessness stems from service providers, the countries with the best-developed service systems record the highest levels of homelessness. This is known as the *service-statistics-paradox"* (UN-Habitat, 2000, p.29).

Hence, the more shelter beds, the more people are counted as homeless if other homeless situations are not included. A similar effect may arise from the practice in Denmark (like in Sweden) to count homeless people who involuntary and informally stay with family and friends (or illegal bed-providers) only if they complain about this situation in contact with the social services (p.77). If they are rejected and discouraged from such contacts, they are in effect excluded from the counts.

Arguably, the same paradox may interfere in a historical comparison in a single country. In *Ending Homelessness?* the Irish case might serve as an example. Here, the number of homeless people grew with the expansion of emergency accommodation, which in turn resulted from the government's ambition to live up to its promise that no one would need to sleep rough. When these places were filled, it is not quite easy to tell if this was due to increased homelessness or because already homeless people hereby became "visible" and possible to count, since Ireland did not count so-called "hidden homelessness" (p.95). Conversely, municipalities are able to deliberately reduce visible, recorded homelessness through closing such facilities and thereby force or encourage people who would need them to instead move to neighbouring communities – or enter the status of 'hidden homelessness'. Or one may turn rooms in a homeless shelter into rental dwellings – which to a certain extent is what Finland has done. I do not doubt the changes of the actual homelessness number presented in the book (and in other reports and analyses), but I think this problem with statistics is always worth considering.

I would also like to comment the emphasis put on individual actors in a few places in the book. In explaining the success of the Finnish strategies to end homelessness, the importance of certain individuals is highlighted. I do not want to downplay their significance, but Finland has had other important actors, and as claimed elsewhere in the book, the Y-foundation has been extremely important in this respect (p.120 f.). Neither do I question the idea that frequent shifts of actors leading the two other countries' strategies were problematic. But both the exchange of leaders and the achievements of other leaders, respectively, may partly be due to the roles, mandates and resources they were provided by their organisations and national governments. The Y-foundation – neither state nor a conventional NGO – is probably an institution that is especially able to provide both resources and innovations and influential individual actors.

Explaining Change and Non-change

In all the three studied countries homelessness was primarily concentrated in their capitals, the biggest cities in the country (p.125 f. and passim). Urbanisation obviously matters – the more centralised job supply, the more people will move to these cities, with or without housing. Booming economy, urbanisation and housing shortage hang together. In the book emphasis is put on the global financial crisis as an explanation

for homelessness growth, as it implied less housing construction (at least in Ireland), higher unemployment rates and higher eviction risks (p.144 f.). However, economic recession also entails less tight housing markets in the cities, more vacancies and perhaps lower rents and in some countries (Denmark) government stimulus of housing construction as a means to counteract this very recession. It would have been interesting if these complex relations between homelessness, economic conditions and fluctuations and state actions had been disentangled over a longer time frame. Despite the similarities in the three countries' situation the general impression is that the financial crisis (and the policy responses it triggered) explains the Irish failure, while the strong commitment (and the Y-foundation) explains the Finnish success, and the Danish status quo is given somewhat less attention.

In explaining the outcomes of the strategies, the authors of *Ending Homelessness?* extend their discussion to also include factors that were not explicitly parts of the strategies, which helps in understanding the differences regarding the changes of homelessness rates. The following comments and reflections on markets, state actions and images of homeless people should be read as suggested complements to these very interesting accounts.

On the Role of the Housing Market

In all three countries, social housing is ascribed a very important role in housing supply for homeless people – both in the strategies and in the analyses of their outcomes. It is stated that in both Ireland and Denmark an important reason to the fact that homelessness was not reduced was that social housing was not produced to a sufficient extent, regardless of the obvious need, while Finland built (and bought) a substantial number of such units during the investigated decade after the 2008 strategy. For a reader from a country that stubbornly refuses to introduce such a sector on the housing market it is somewhat frustrating. Are there no solutions to homelessness through, for instance, regulation and governance of the private and public rental sectors, rent levels, allocation systems or grounds for eviction?

In *Ending Homelessness?* the housing market outside the social sector sometimes figures almost like a force or an actor that cannot be regulated or affected and it is rarely considered in strategies and action plans to end homelessness, as if it were uncontrollable. Still, this market looks very different in the three countries. In Ireland, like in England and Scotland, private rental housing seems to imply insecure tenancies and high rents. While the Irish households have been protected from high rents through special housing allowances, the definition of this system as 'social housing support' has entailed that they loose their access to regular social housing. There is an apparent risk that this system implies even higher rents and that this kind of support actually benefits private landlords more than low income households. In addition, the higher rents entail more rent arrears and evictions, and

eventually more homelessness (O'Sullivan 2020, p.18, 115). In Finland, the majority of households own their dwellings directly or indirectly. The private rental market was deregulated in 1994, but according to Ruonavaara (2013, p.339 f.) the Finnish housing policy still follows a traditional "path" of social responsibility and public housing is distinctively "social". More important in this country, according to the authors of *Ending… ,* is the special "stream" of social housing for homeless people that the Y-foundation provides and controls. In Finland, like in Denmark, there appears to be more owner-occupied and less private rental dwellings and my impression is that the private rental market is not considered important for the provision of housing for homeless people in these countries. The authors themselves comment: "… the private rented sector plays a pivotal role in the Irish story, raising complex questions of regulation, investment and public subsidy, but the entire private rented sector merits little mention in the stories of Denmark and Finland" (p.160). This reader wonders why – is this segment of the housing market not accessible for homeless people? If so, then why? Is it too small? Are the rent levels too high? Or is it considered as 'holy' – uncontrollable for political reasons?

States Matter – But How?

In the book *Why so different?* Bengtsson and colleagues (2013) account for lasting differences between the Nordic countries' housing markets and housing policies through an analysis of path dependency. Among the five Nordic countries, only Finland and Iceland are claimed to have a "selective" housing regime by tradition, but around the turn of the century Norway shifted its previous general orientation into a more selective approach. Besides that both Norway and Finland – unlike Denmark and Sweden – in the last 20–30 years have a more selective, and thereby 'social', housing policy, they stand out as the only European countries that have indeed managed to reduce the rate of homelessness in recent years. In the end of her book on homeless policy and practice, Norwegian researcher Evelyn Dyb (2020) notes that these two countries are also the only ones in Europe that not only chose a housing-led approach in their strategies against homelessness, but also made central housing authorities responsible for implementing theses strategies and saw to that they were anchored in the national housing policy (Dyb 2020, p.173f.). According to *Ending… ,* the ministry responsible for housing in Ireland was indeed involved in the homeless strategy, but the creation of a Cross-Departmental Team in 1998 and similar committees thereafter may have facilitated that homelessness was decoupled from the national housing policy, especially in the context of the financial crisis when external actors and international bank institutions gained strong influence over state actions. Hence, national policies matter, and states matter, but it is also important what *parts* of the state are involved in, and in charge of, strategies against homelessness. Perhaps that observation might contribute to the explanations of the different outcomes in the three countries in focus in *Ending homelessness?*

Furthermore, state funding matters. For a Swede, comparing funding of homelessness strategies is quite embarrassing. Sweden has no social housing and the municipal housing companies are obliged to act business-like and cannot receive public support from the central state or the municipalities. And the state will not spend money on counteracting homelessness. While the Irish Government provided €100 million per annum 2009–2018 on social housing, a share of which was used for implementing the homelessness strategy (p.54), Denmark spent €65 million on its first strategy 2009–2012 (p.48) and Finland in total €420 million on its successive strategies 2008–2015 (p.87), the Swedish state spent in total €4.5 million on its short-lived homelessness strategy 2007–2009 (NBHW 2010, p.7).

The authors put great emphasis – rightly, in my view – on the supply and allocation of social housing. A short section on the ethnic composition of the homeless population in Ireland indicates that private landlords' prejudices and racism may contribute to growing homelessness in the country. But some Danish municipalities' resistance to use their legal opportunity to allocate 25% of vacant public housing to people with housing needs (pp.114, 174), and the local authorities' unwillingness in Dublin to give homeless people precedence to social housing (p.130) might reflect negative attitudes to homeless people even within the social/public sector. These observations cast doubt over the authors' conclusion that "greater autonomy for local government" contributed to the good results of the Finnish strategy even during the financial crisis (p.172). Autonomous municipalities are also able to refrain from social housing or from combatting homelessness in times of austerity.

For a central government that is dedicated to reduce homelessness there are other options than to design and fund strategies and expand the social housing sector. As the authors note, only Ireland among the three nations tried to use legislation as a means to counteract homelessness. In 2015, it required local authorities to allocate a substantial part of social housing vacancies to homeless people (pp.62, 70). Other legal measures in Ireland concerned tenancy protection (p.132) which made it harder to evict tenants. Possible additional means would be legislation to increase the public control of allocation of vacant flats in private rental estate, at least if they are partly financed by the state, and directives to adapt to the UN Convention of Children's Rights. However, the studied strategies in the three countries appear to be based primarily on 'carrots' in terms of funding and attention. It could also be worth investigating whether the involved governments revised laws and taxes that counteracted the goals of the homeless strategies, which was the case when the one and – so far – only strategy against homelessness was launched in Sweden in 2007 (Sahlin, 2015).

The authors suggest on several occasions, maybe especially in the Danish context, that homeless people in well-developed welfare states tend to have more complex problems like substance abuse and mental problems than in countries with weaker safety nets, such as the U.S. (see, e.g., pp.139, 155). The logic behind this reasoning is that welfare states in general protect their citizens from crude poverty and have mechanisms in place to see to that also low-income household have access to conditions necessary for a reasonable standard of living – social housing is but one of these means, social insurance and health care are other ones.

However, one could just as well expect that in a welfare state, people with mental or addiction disorders would have been taken good care of, just like people who are unable to work because of other illness, disabilities or old age. Why does substance abuse and mental health problems appear to be more common than physical diseases or intellectual disabilities among the homeless ones in Europe? Perhaps this overrepresentation should not be interpreted as residual homelessness that will fade out when the housing supply increases, and not as a sign that only such people remain because all others are housed, but rather as an indication of categories that are both excluded from the housing market and deliberately neglected by welfare states of today.

Images of Homeless People

An additional possible explanation of the overrepresentation of mental illness and addiction among the homeless in Denmark (pp.115, 116) is the national discourse on homelessness. Almost 30 years ago, Danish sociologist Margaretha Järvinen reviewed homelessness research in the Nordic countries 1980–1992. Among other important observations, she found that the discourses on homelessness differed substantially between the countries:

"While the Finnish – and the Swedish – homelessness discourse often has dealt with the correlation between alcohol problems and homelessness, the Danish discourse on homelessness has to an extreme extent been about the correlation between mental problems and homelessness" (Järvinen 1992, p.38).

In a comment to Järvinen's study, Preben Brandt agrees and explains: "Danish research into homelessness is to a high extent characterised by utility research and has a strong element of health policy, primarily focused on the areas of psychiatry and substance abuse. Throughout the past 10 years, the research has overwhelmingly been about the scope of mental problems among the homeless" (Brandt 1992, p.75). Brandt further explains that Danish psychiatry, as well as the media and user organisations, by that time were engaged in the housing situations of mentally ill persons due to worries about the consequences of deinstitutionalised mental health care. Just like Järvinen claims, substance abuse has long been closely

associated with homelessness in the Swedish discourse. In research of the 1970s and 1980s, homelessness was approached as a kind of lifestyle or subculture, centred around alcohol, and people who did not fit in with this stereotype were not counted or described as homeless.

My point is that the perception of homeless people as characterised by mental illness and addiction might result partly from the fact that their problems by tradition are recorded and attended to differently than, for instance, the qualities of brokers' customers or people on the waiting lists for public housing. In Sweden this tendency is reinforced today by the fact that such 'social' problems with the individual in some cities have become a condition for access to temporary accommodation.

To sum up: if people with substance abuse and mental health problems are indeed overrepresented among the homeless, this indicates gaps and shortcomings in the welfare state, rather than its maturity, and the idea that homeless people to a great extent suffer from these problems might in part result from research traditions that have contributed to a discourse that could have made it even harder for homeless people to access private or social housing.

Housing First and Housing Rights

I am fully convinced by the conclusion in *Ending homelessness?* that "the key element of Finland's relative success" is "a broad 'Housing First' philosophy rather than a particular programme that can be bolted onto an existing housing and homelessness system" (p.165). Still, the problem of housing supply for homeless people in general and for Housing First programmes remain in most other countries.

A Note on Housing First

All the three countries honoured Housing First and housing-led approaches to ending homelessness, but only Finland used Housing First as an overall strategy for all kinds of homelessness. Despite ambitious investments and organisation Denmark only succeeded in involving 5% of the homeless and 14% of its specific target group, long-term shelter users, in its Housing First programme (p.116), and in Ireland the scope was even smaller (p.118). There is an implicit assumption that the concept of Housing First should only be used for homeless people with complex needs, addiction, mental illness etc., and that it requires very ambitious forms of intense and multi-professional support à la Pathways to Housing. However, the occupation with individual problems and professional support, involves a risk that secure and permanent housing is being downplayed as less significant. The attraction of the Finnish version of Housing First – and maybe a part of its success – is that it does not seem to fall into this trap (p.106).

Personally, I have been convinced of the merits of Housing First since its introduction, even before I heard of and read about the Pathways to Housing model. In the H13 project in Hannover, Germany, 13 "chronically homeless" men were offered permanent housing and support when they wanted it. It was a success – in the short run as well as in the follow-up study after seven years (Busch-Geertsema 1998, 2002). However, the consistent emphasis on massive professional support in the Pathways approach, as well as the success stories about single individuals with complex needs and problems, who against all odds have managed to keep their housing, have a flip side: they might reinforce the image of homeless people as very sick, difficult and different people, unlike ordinary neighbours and tenants. The repeatedly told experience of the difficulties to scale up Housing First and to acquire dwellings for such programmes may have something to do with this image.

In my view, Housing First should emphasise housing, rather than support, and homeless people without complex needs should also be offered secure housing. Likewise, floating support by professionals should be available for everybody. If support and housing were truly detached, support would not be a condition for housing, and conversely, support should be available for people who want it, even if they are not participants in specific Housing First-projects. Such an approach to support may also be a way to "mainstream" eviction prevention.

The Problem of Legitimate Allocation

In all three countries of the study, housing is allocated primarily through the market but also through waiting lists and – to a lesser extent – through more or less organised prioritising according to need. The balance in this mixture differs across countries and might change over time, but as housing is a scarce, place-bound market resource as well as a necessary living condition, the scope for each one of these principles is necessarily limited.

Although most dwellings are allocated through the market, that is, the households that can pay most will "win" the vacant homes, social housing is mostly allocated through a mixture of waiting lists and precedence criteria that, in turn, are often controversial and open to interpretation and negotiations. These problems are well known and in a way unavoidable. In Ireland the homeless strategies were to some extent counteracted or hampered by politicians who argued that it was unfair to prioritise homeless people, or feared that people would claim that they were homeless without actually being in that situation (pp.156, 173). In Denmark, several municipalities refrained from using their option to suggest tenants for a share of their public housing (pp.114, 124, 156). Accordingly, local politicians appear to prefer allocation on the basis of fortunes and income or waiting time before precedence based on needs. If this represents the public opinion, and it might do so, it is of course a problem. But at least in Sweden, this position seems to mirror – also,

instead or rather – some politicians' expectation that people in severe need of housing will not contribute to the wealth of their municipalities or the local tax revenues. This is an even more critical problem, which may result in a vicious circle of reinforced hostile attitudes and actions towards people who are homeless, poor and/or immigrants and refugees.

There is a risk that some households are not able to qualify for any of the allocation mechanisms – competition, queuing, precedence according to need – but are bluntly excluded. It might appear easier for landlords, and departments of central states and municipalities, to turn to such a "solution" if there is no general right or obligation involved. Municipalities may hope for that other municipalities can give room for their homeless families and singles, and governments may try to reject non-citizens or persuade refugees to move back to the countries they have fled from. In an interesting attempt to distribute migrants more evenly across the country, the Swedish Parliament in 2016 adopted legislation that obliged municipalities to provide housing for a specific number of newly arrived refugees with residence permits. Although they claimed that they had no vacant dwellings, most municipalities managed to house these newcomers. However, when the Supreme Court in 2019 found that the legal obligation only covered two years, many local governments decided to terminate the contracts of these tenants, and encourage them to move out of town.

It is this reader's conviction that to counteract homelessness effectively, the right to housing that is the basis of the Housing First philosophy must be taken seriously and encompass all kinds of homeless people. Through individual rights and public obligations the question mark in the title of this important book may eventually be removed.

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Ingrid Sahlin
Lund University, Sweden

The book's main message is spelled out in its title: *Ending Homelessness?* The question mark is significant. The book does not offer an unambiguous answer as to whether, within the political framework and strategies of the three countries, it is possible to reach a zero point of homelessness. The justification for the choice of the three countries Denmark, Finland and Ireland is that they represent similarities in size, adoption of homeless strategies, and availability of comparable data on homeless persons and households in homeless shelters or other types of emergency accommodation.

The subtitle of the book points to the differences and that the countries are three contrasting cases. One essential contrast lies in the extent of homelessness and the trends in the number of homeless people over the past decade. Finland, as one of very few European countries, has succeeded in reducing the number of homeless people, Ireland has seen an increasing problem and in particular the number of homeless families has gone up, while Denmark finds itself in a middle position with a reasonably stable rate of a homeless population. The study establishes a baseline of 2008 for comparing the cases, around a time when the three countries initiate strategies to reduce homeless. These strategies, which are thoroughly described in the book, have both similarities and dissimilarities. The book outlines the three countries' strategies to address homelessness and discusses the premises and frameworks for implementing the policy and to achieve the goals set by each country.

Who is the target reader and what is the purpose of writing the book? What do the authors want to achieve? "The book seeks only to provide limited generalisability, rather than a broader generalisability as in the case with variable-oriented comparative research, and to provide a narrative that relates 'concrete knowledge about specific processes' (Della Porta, 2013 p.203) in relation to the formulation and implementation of policies that sought to end homelessness in Denmark, Finland and Ireland." (p.24). That is what we learn, or at least what the authors clearly phrase, about the purpose of the publication. Is this a text that solely applies to readers with particular interest in one or all of the three countries? I choose to interpret and expect that the book contributes some universalistic elements, and a few stories that are transferable to other settings and countries, that motivates further reading and a wider audience. A more explicit statement of the purpose of the book would have been more inviting. And there are transferable lessons.

The roughly 200 pages address a number of different aspects of both politics, strategies to end or reduce homelessness, and prerequisites for implementing the policy. As a reading guide, here is a brief resumé of the book's chapters. I begin with Chapter 2 (and return to Chapter 1), which describes the policy before the objective of ending homelessness was introduced. The big picture and the long lines of the development of the welfare state, the housing system and politics to

address homeless are drawn. Finland introduced its first initiative to reduce homelessness in the 1980s, while Denmark launched its first strategy against homelessness in 2009. Ireland introduced the first distinct homeless policies in 1996 with the Homeless Initiative. The chapter illustrates the close relationship between the production of figures on homelessness and the initiatives being launched. The figures and monitoring of trends through point-in-time measurements organised in time series have released political initiatives to address homelessness.

Chapter 3 provides a fairly straightforward description of the countries' respective strategies for reducing the number of homeless people in the second decade of the 2000s. The description is organised in three phases starting with the initial phase from around 2008, with a quick look back at the situation before baseline, and goes on to phase 2 from 2012 to 2015. The third phase is set in the period from 2016 to 2018. The following chapter (4) presents methods for surveying the homeless population and through the figures follows trends in the development of the scale of homelessness. Although the three countries collect statistics by using different methods and apply different definitions of homeless people, they have reasonably good comparable figures for large groups in the population. Here, the authors make it somewhat unnecessarily cumbersome for the reader by referring to ETHOS[1] categories, which are only partially described and defined, while the map, namely the overview of ETHOS' many categories of homelessness are listed in Chapter 1.

The next two chapters (5 and 6) are devoted to explanations under the headings "housing matters" and "welfare and policy matters." These two chapters serve as necessary summaries and the application of perspectives to the more descriptive, and at times well detailed, presentations in the preceding chapters. The final chapter, Conclusion, draws together the threads from primarily Chapters 5 and 6. It is probably necessary to provide some details of each of the three countries to bring about differences and similarities, and to explain the structural and political conditions for increases and decreases in homelessness, such as the increase in family homelessness in Ireland, and for implementing the strategies. The question is whether the descriptions are too detailed, so that the most important implications may slip away in the details. Therefore, the last three chapters are both necessary and the part that provides the most insight into the individual case. After what I experience as a tardy start, I read with rising interest throughout the chapters.

Let us then return to Chapter 1, where it is natural to start reading. The chapter includes many interesting aspects, such as the historical review of how homelessness is administered in the 20th century and a discussion about – the lack of – empirical evidence of the connection between de-institutionalisation in the 1960s and 70s and homelessness. For example, a reasonably detailed review of shelter

1 ETHOS: European Typologies of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

users and long-term versus short-term homelessness and what characterises the different groups is interesting, but a bit too lengthy. There are too many pages before the main theme signalled in the book's title is launched, and too many topics. One of many topics is based on references to studies from particularly the US, among others summarising that "cross sectional research failed to capture the dynamics of homelessness" (p.12), and further, "our understanding of entries to and exit from homelessness has been shaped by increasingly sophisticated methodological approaches, in particular, the use of longitudinal administrative data (Culhane, 2016), and in addition to randomized controlled trials (RCT), particularly researching the effectiveness of Housing First versus Ready Housing" (p.13).

The studies conducted with longitudinal data, particularly in the US and Australia, provide valuable insights that European countries can draw on. On the other hand, US represents a landscape unlike most Northern and Central European countries both in terms of welfare schemes and the scope of homeless people, not to mention access to large administrative data sets on homelessness, which facilitate sophisticated analyses. As demonstrated in the book, Finland, one of the few countries that has experiences a marked reduction in the number of homeless, uses cross sectional data in time series to monitor the trends. I can hardly see the justification in characterising cross sectional research as "distorting" "in terms of policy design and service provision" (p.9). The scale of the populations of homeless people in Finland, and in Denmark and partly Ireland, are such that the service providers often know what kind of problems the various subgroups have, and can solve or mitigate the problems, given the right framework, including political prioritisation, funding and, not least, a direction on how homelessness can be dealt with given that the goal is to reduce it. The necessity of having these elements in place is also an important message in the book.

The concept *Housing First* is a pervasive theme in the book. It occurs on average twice per page. What the term covers is, however, not always as clear. The spelling varies. The most accomplished is Housing First, with capital letters as in proper names and brands, but the term also appears in the form 'Housing First' and housing first. The latter is often associated with *housing-led* approach or orientation. In some contexts, a housing-led policy and Housing First are referred to as identical – or almost covering identical content – and in the next few paragraphs it refers to "Housing First in the North American sense." In Chapter 1, the North American relates to Sam Tsemberis' *Pathways Housing First*, established in New York in 1994. The authors also discuss faithfulness to and deviations from the New York model, however, there is no comprehensive description of the various elements of the model, and explanation of which elements to be faithful to versus deviant from therefore remains incomplete. It is stated that Denmark is largely faithful to the original model. Finland, on the other hand, has given Housing First radical new

content. The Finnish Y-Foundation, which has a central role in reducing homelessness, declares on its website that the foundation has developed Housing First (capitalised) since 1985, a decade before the North American Pathway Housing First model was established.

Possibly, the authors have chosen not to clarify different contents of the term Housing First, precisely because the meaning of Housing First and housing first (or housing-led) has become plural, and faithfulness to the New York model may not be the only and perhaps not the fastest pathway to the objective of reduced homelessness/zero vision. Imprecision also occurs in the use of other essential concepts. It is particularly prominent in the mentioning of contrasting models or interventions to variants of Housing First, such as "staircase", "housing ready" and "treatment first". The "staircase of transition" was first described by Ingrid Sahlin as a term for the Swedish "model", in which homeless people are expected to get ready for independent housing by moving up the steps with gradually increased independence. The housing staircase is qualitatively different from "treatment first". The staircase model has been described in the term "no treatment at all"; the person should him/herself deal with problems with dependency and mental issues before deserving a tenancy. Perhaps the lack of definition of these concepts (also) is a conscious choice, the authors want to illustrate a general mindset that is opposed by the idea that homeless people need a place to live. But conceptual clarifications, especially of the central and most commonly used terms, help the reader's access to the text.

The authors pose a question about the importance of individuals' effort in maintaining focus on the goals and providing the means and capacity to implement the strategy. The question is legitimate and important. In the case of Finland, to which the question relates, it is suggested that a couple of strong personalities have had a decisive impact on politics and the progress of reducing the number of homeless people. Contrary to Ireland, where there has been several political shifts of government officer in charge of homelessness politics in the period from 2008. The text also shows that deeper social structures and institutional arrangements have at least as much explanation both to understand the choices made by the three countries and the results they have achieved. The Y-Foundation in Finland was established 35 years ago and was a direct response to an increase in the number of homeless people. The pronounced purpose of the foundation was to provide housing with young homeless people as a particularly designated target group. It is interesting to take a closer look at the broad composition of the stakeholders behind the foundation. These include, among others, the Finnish Construction Trade Union and the Confederation of Finnish Construction Industries, which represent the housing supply side, and the largest municipalities, which are responsible for implementing the policy.

Finland is the only EU member state to reduce the number of homeless people over the past decade. It must be said that Norway, even though the country is not a member of the EU, but careful to adopt most directives and regulations issued by the European Commission, has seen a larger reduction in the the homeless population in the same period. The relevance of mentioning Norway are some of its similarities to Finland. The housing system in both countries is dominated by homeowners. The share of homeowners is highest in Norway (80 per cent), but the share is larger in Finland, for example than in Denmark (70 versus 60 per cent). The second parallel is that in Finland and Norway the homeless policy is embedded in the housing policy area and has been since its inception. Finland succeeded from the mid-1980s to reduce the number of homeless people by providing housing, but it took some time to acknowledge that there was a group of long-term homeless people, who needed more than a dwelling. Finland extended (or reinvented?) its housing-led policy or created a distinctive Finnish variant of Housing First, which has proved successful in reducing the number of homeless people. To the question of the importance of individuals, whether it be ministers or other key figures and the political will to prioritise, the authors deliver a strong argument that this is the case, however, the text demonstrate that deeper societal structures is fundamental in the policy formation and in the implementation phase.

The book is 200 pages long. The content might have been tightened up and the scope somewhat reduced. There are too many details especially in the first part. The reader does not get help in sorting the details in the form of tables or other visual aids, which could sum up some significant contrasts and similarities between the three cases. I think it would have invited more readers to come along, and this book deserves many readers, and many potential readers need the book. The message is essentially quite simple. If the goal is to end homelessness, homeless people should be assisted to acquire a home. Some in Denmark and in Finland many, in Ireland fewer, need services and help to deal with social and health issues as well. It is that simple – and so complicated. The book is, thankfully, no manual or recipe on how a state should reduce homelessness and possibly reach the zero vision. That would be to simplify the challenges. Historically, even through the construction of the modern welfare state, homeless people are treated as outcasts, and it takes something to change such grounded structures.

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Evelyn Dyb,
Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research NIBR,
Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway