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Housing Social Work – What, To Whom and
Why? The Context of Finnish Homelessness
and Housing Work

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Background

- A two-year research project funded by Ministry of Social Affairs and Health
- The topic: the role of social work in preventing and combating segregation and homelessness in Finnish cities.
- This role is approached within the framework of **housing social work and theoretical discussions on urban displacement, segregation and gentrification**
- The aim is to make visible and strengthen the role of housing social work in housing for vulnerable people and thereby contribute to building a socially sustainable city.

Research Consortium

- University of Tampere
 - **PI Professor Kirsi Juhila** and PhD researchers Jenni Mäki and Mikko Ilmokunnas
- University of Turku
 - University Lecturer/Researcher Jarkko Rasinkangas and PhD researcher Veera Mäki
- Y-Foundation
 - Postdoctoral researcher Riikka Perälä

The Starting Point and Research Questions

- Three different cases from two Finnish cities, where previously homeless people were displaced of their obtained homes and relocated to new apartments and residential areas due to demolition or major urban re-development
 - What kind of an effect the displacement had on the displaced residents' housing and lives in general?
 - What kind of service needs the residents had before, during and after the displacement process and what kind support was provided?
 - What kind of wider societal impacts and questions were involved with the displacement process and how they were addressed?

The Case of Displacement



The Data

- The data:
 - **1. Qualitative thematic interviews** of the displaced residents (N=37) and of public officials, decision-makers and professionals, who had a role in the displacement process through their job or other responsibilities (N=75)
 - **2. Social work documentation** (N=33) on some of the aforementioned residents' service needs
 - **3. Register data (N=192)** on aforementioned residents' housing trajectories before and after the displacement
 - **4. Public and media documents** relating to the displacement

Interview themes

- Interviewee's background
- The background of the displacement process
- The implementation of the displacement process and the related service needs of residents
- Residents' settling into a new place and related service needs
- Interviewee's thoughts on housing social work in housing and homelessness work and policies

Housing Social Work

Granfelt & Turunen, 2021

- Homelessness prevention work with people affected by homelessness, addressing the economic, social and health problems that jeopardize their housing.
- The aim is to eradicate and prevent homelessness, secure the stability of housing and improve the economic and psychosocial well-being of homeless people and people who have experienced homelessness.
- Work done on a societal, community and individual level

Housing Social Work and Housing First

Anderson et. al 2018

- Housing First (HF) approach= access to regular housing at the forefront of homelessness policy and program planning
- Housing is the first need, and other issues and problems can be better addressed once an individual has obtained safe and secure housing
- **Includes necessary support to remain housed**
- A major shift away from the “linear” or the “staircase” model, which sees housing as a privilege that needs to be earned by committing to for example rehabilitation

Housing First –the Finnish Variation I

- Starting point of the national level homelessness strategies since 2007
 - Housing as a basic human and social right
 - Housing in normal surroundings/ permanent homes
 - Own independent rental apartment either in scattered housing or in a supported housing unit
 - Own rental contract (normally for unlimited time)
 - Adequate support if needed and wanted
 - Autonomy/ unconditionality
 - Normality

Housing First –Finnish Variation II

- Strategy has evaluated to be successful, since the number of homeless people has been decreasing continuously
 - In 2020 app. 4 341 homeless people.
 - The number of long-term homeless people was 1054
 - Number of families as homeless 201
- At the moment the national level aim is to eradicate homelessness by 2027

Critique of Housing First

- Lacks sufficient support in the everyday level of housing and the residents remain vulnerable to e.g. eviction
- Is too restrictive and lacks possibilities for real choice and resident autonomy
- Follows an instrumental logic of cost-effectiveness and lacks societal level critique of homelessness and housing policies

Preliminary Results (do not circulate):

1. Not Housing Only

- The data contained a wide variety of types of housing social work
- All of the interviewees also recognized the importance of this work in spite of their professional background
- The most common form of housing social work was targeted at **preventing the recurrence of homelessness** (e.g. rent follow up and assisting the residents in applying for different social benefits) and **increasing the psycho-social well-being of the residents** with e.g. help of various types of work activity and other social interaction
- There were also a lot support targeted at helping residents in their everyday chores and errands (such as helping the residents to keep their apartment tidy)
- Residents were also assisted to seek help for their substance abuse and mental health problems, if they so wished, and help for these problems had also been brought into the units by the cities.

Interview Quote : Evolution of the Activities in HF-units

- (...) But I would argue that there was just this type of preservation, **the preservation of people**. There was not as much close cooperation as here with the residents, more **janitor staff**, you know (...) When this activity was started, the whole staff went through a training course in community education as an apprenticeship, and we have tried to cultivate the idea of community all the time. And I think it was after a year or something after this course, **I remember that we talked about the fact that now it seems that we are starting to be a bit like in the same boat with the residents**. It was no longer such a confrontation.
- - Head of Housing First Unit, August 2022

Preliminary Results (do not circulate):

2. Highlighting the autonomy and choice of the residents –but with reservations

- Resident's autonomy and choice were seen as important principles of housing first work and related housing social work, but here the interviewees' views also differed
- The key tension: how much housing social work can take into account the needs and wishes of the residents in relation to the objectives set for example by the public officials
 - Some housing units had for example more restrictions than others and a part of housing social work was the follow-up and the negotiation of these principles with the residents
 - Some housing units also had rehabilitative goals and activities, in which the residents were expected to participate
 - Also, an increasing pressures towards resident's "graduation" from housing first units, which also had an effect to the housing social work: more emphasis on e.g. making people "housing ready".

Interview Quote: Who Is the Actual Target of Housing Social Work?

- If you're thinking, you have to move, it's a terrible process. Let alone, if your resources are minimal, and they're making decisions for you. You don't have any influence, to that extent. Of course, maybe this clientele is used to having things decided for them. But I'm sure it always feels bad to some extent that you can't influence them.

Preliminary Results (do not circulate)

3. Structural Level Critique and the Limits of Housing Social Work

- Interviewees, especially those doing concrete homelessness work with people experiencing homelessness, raised broader problems related to homelessness in their interviews
- Some of the interviews drew **a clear line between housing social work and other social work**, and respondents felt that housing social work could not replace the role of other social work in combating homelessness.
- Here interviews addressed e.g. the topics of barriers to substance abuse and mental health treatment, bureaucracy related to social benefits and a lack of variety in supported housing
- The interviews also criticised urban policy and urban development, where the most vulnerable citizens were often displaced by the more affluent or housed in buildings of extremely poor quality and in danger of demolition.

Interview Quote: We Can't Do Everything

- It's a terribly small percentage, unfortunately, of whom you can even think that maybe someday (they will recover) .It feels like a huge expectation on us, because we aren't miracle workers.
 - Social counselor, Housing First Unit

Conclusions

- Housing social work plays a key part in Housing First approach in Finland
- The work has been developed over the past years, particularly in terms of the psychosocial well-being of residents and the meaningfulness of everyday life, and this was also seen as a successful development in the interviews.
- The most important and also time-consuming role of this work seems to be to prevent the recurrence of homelessness and help the residents with bureaucracy related to various social assistance and employment programs.
- In the light of the interviews, one of the key factors contributing to the risk of recurrence of homelessness was also related to this bureaucracy
- All in all, the relationship of housing social work with the surrounding society was characterised by tensions in the interviews
- A key tension related in particular to the role of other institutions and sectors of society in preventing homelessness, which was seen as currently inadequate.



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