

PEOPLE IN HOMES Aren't Homeless

Finland is the only EU country where homelessness is falling. Its secret? Giving people homes as soon as they need them – unconditionally. As in many countries, homelessness in Finland had long been tackled using a staircase model: you were supposed to move through different stages of temporary accommodation as you got your life back on track, with an apartment as the ultimate reward.

“It was clear to everyone the old system wasn't working; we needed radical change. We decided to make the housing unconditional,” says Juha Kaakinen, who now runs the Y-Foundation responsible for developing affordable housing. *“To say, look, you don't need to solve your problems before you get a home. Instead, a home should be the secure foundation that makes it easier to solve your problems.”*

When the policy was being devised just over a decade ago, the four people who came up with what is now widely known as the *Housing First* principle – a social scientist, a doctor, a politician and a bishop – called their report *NimiOvessa* (Your Name on the Door).

Housing First's early goal was to create 2,500 new homes. It has created 3,500. Since its launch in 2008, the number of long-term homeless people in Finland has fallen by more than 35 percent. Rough sleeping has been all but eradicated in Helsinki, where only one 50-bed night shelter remains, and where winter temperatures can plunge to -20C.

The city's deputy mayor Sanna Vesikansa says that in her childhood, *“hundreds in the whole country slept in the parks and forests. We hardly have that any more. Street sleeping is very rare now.”* In England, meanwhile, government figures show the number of rough sleepers – a small fraction of the total homeless population – climbed from 1,768 in 2010 to 4,677 last year (and since the official count is based on a single evening, charities say the real figure is far higher).

But *Housing First* is not just about housing. *“Services have been crucial,”* says Helsinki's mayor, Jan Vapaavuori, who was housing minister when the original scheme was launched. *“Many long-term homeless people have addictions, mental health issues, medical conditions that need ongoing care. The support has to be there.”*

Tatu Ainesmaa just turned 32, and for the first time in more than a decade he has a home he can truly say is his: an airy two-room apartment in a small, recently renovated block in a leafy suburb of Helsinki, with a view over birch trees. *“It's a big miracle,”* he says. *“I've been in communes, but everyone was doing drugs and I've had to get out. I've been in bad relationships; same thing. I've been on my brother's sofa. I've slept rough. I've never had my own place. This is huge for me.”* Downstairs in the two-storey block is a bright communal living and dining area, a spotless kitchen, a gym room and a sauna (in Finland, saunas are basically obligatory). Upstairs is where the 21 tenants, men and women, most under 30, live.

Housing First costs money, of course: Finland has spent €250m creating new homes and hiring 300 extra support workers. But a recent study showed the savings in emergency healthcare, social services and the justice system totalled as much as €15,000 a year for every homeless person in properly supported housing.



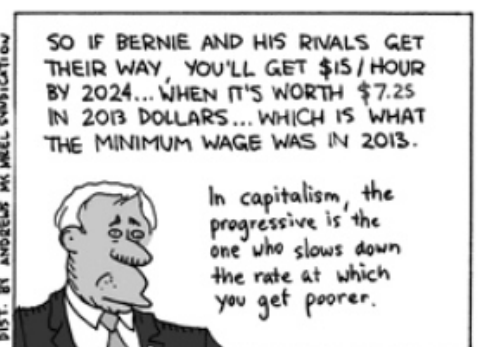
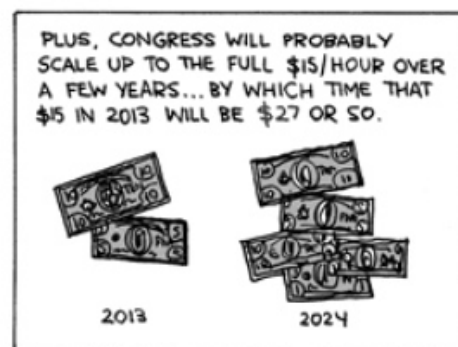
But if *Housing First* is working in Helsinki, where half the country's homeless people live, it is also because it is part of a much broader housing policy. More pilot schemes serve little real purpose, says Kaakinen: *“We know what works. You can have all sorts of projects, but if you don't have the actual homes ... A sufficient supply of social housing is just crucial.”* And there, the Finnish capital is fortunate. Helsinki owns 60,000 social housing units; one in seven residents live in city-owned housing. It also owns 70 percent of the land within the city limits, runs its own construction company, and has a current target of building 7,000 more new homes – of all categories – a year.

In each new district, the city maintains a **strict housing mix** to limit social segregation: 25 percent **social housing**, 30 percent **subsidised purchase**, and 45 percent **private sector**. Helsinki also insists on no visible external differences between private and public housing stock, and sets no maximum income ceiling on its social housing tenants. It has invested heavily, too, in homelessness prevention, setting up special teams to advise and help tenants in danger of losing their homes and halving the number of evictions from city-owned and social housing from 2008 to 2016. *“We own much of the land, we have a zoning monopoly, we run our own construction company,”* says Riikka Karjalainen, senior planning officer. *“That helped a lot with Housing First because simply, there is no way you will eradicate homelessness without a serious, big-picture housing policy.”*

Finland has not entirely solved homelessness. Nationwide, about 5,500 people are still officially classified as homeless. The overwhelming majority – more than 70 percent – are living temporarily with friends or relatives. But public-sector planning and collective effort have helped ensure that as a way to reduce long-term homelessness, *Housing First* is a proven success. *“We're not there yet, of course,”* says Vesikansa. *“No model is perfect; we still have failures. But I'm proud we had the courage to try it.”*

The mayor agrees. *“We had to get rid of the night shelters and short-term hostels we still had back then. They had a very long history in Finland, and everyone could see they were not getting people out of homelessness. We decided to reverse the assumptions.”*

Jon Henley,
theguardian.com



MUIR REPORT: DIGNITY, INDIGNITY AND DIRECT DOLLAROCRACY

On a small piece of land, situated off the side of an off ramp on highway 880, sits a group of eleven housing units, the floor space of two pieces of 4by 8 pieces of plywood. This is **Dignity village**, a homeless shelter village built by volunteers to counteract the housing crisis and bypass corrupt officials who continue to appropriate massive amounts of money to STUDY the problem of homelessness but do nothing about it. Most of these units are built with 2 doors and 4 windows, specifically designed to make people feel less claustrophobic, cost about 2,500 dollars, a pittance compared with city backed attempts to put people in metal containers.

This village has a portable toilet at the cost of 165 dollars a month, used tires turned into planter boxes, ambitious plans for a clothes washer run by bicycle pedaling, a community kitchen and plans to put speed bumps on the off ramp street to keep motorists from speeding by and endangering the children. Wifi is provided by Steph Curry.

Nearby sit condo units made of steel corrugated siding, the industrial look, and selling for a million dollars each. If you close your eyes and talk to the residents here, you might not know if you were in Pacific Heights, a suburb in Menlo Park or a neighborhood in Marin County. One of the residents eagerly points out that her unit has a little front porch attached to it, another points out they have a view at the distant hills.

Jackie has a mural on the side of her house and Minnie is already building a little addition onto her unit, which she is proud to point out, was the first one built, like the realtor who assures the buyer the one house in the middle of the tract was made for the developer. Someone else points out that they will soon paint their house three different colors from the supply of paint donated by the local Kelly Moore store and someone else pulls me over to the side and in hushed tones tells me that the people living under the nearby overpass are filthy and let their dogs take dumps without cleaning up after them. Yes, it looks like that's all it takes, the pride of ownership puts some zip in everyone's step and returns color to their cheeks and puts hope in their hearts.

For the volunteers, it brings us back to the reality that these are normal, everyday people like you and I, nothing more, nothing less. Depictions in the media about this massive sector of the great unwashed, who are homeless because of some character flaw are completely and dangerously erroneous. "All you need is love" and a few 2by4s to remedy the situation.

This election is boiling down to which billionaire are you voting for. Oh, to go back to the good old days when all the rich guys could be counted on the fingers of one hand and they spent their time setting hot air balloon records. They are still setting hot air records but now it's with their rhetoric. Presidential elections are attracting the super wealthy like flypaper attracts flies.

If Bernie doesn't make it, Biden might well be the compromise candidate. He would be a more palatable Donald Trump, less overtly stupid, and competent at presiding over the transfer of wealth from the very poor to the very rich. The choice would be between a racist with wealthy friends or a wealthy "ne'er do well" with racist friends. The next 7 months will be all about Barisma.

As the adage goes, "money goes to money and shit goes to shit". The problem is, as more shit piles up, the worse it smells. We all want to participate in American democracy. Since money is now free speech, I'd like the candidates to talk louder. Instead of wasting truckloads of dollars on attack pieces, aired on stations, owned by these unabashed narcissists, why not make direct payments to the voters. Each candidate would write a check for the amount they are willing to pay for your vote. You bring all the checks to the voting station, keep the one from the person you are voting for, get it stamped like validated parking and shred the others. This would be a de-facto tax rebate for the poor, encourage large voter turnout and feed the ego of the sycophants, who have bilked us for the money in the first place. This would redistribute wealth without unnecessary paperwork or congressional hearings.

We've often been told that poor people need to work harder and that wealthy people merely need incentives. Let's pit the money boys against each otherand see where the chips fall.

MUIRWALKER