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Lived Experience of Housing First



The Miracle

- And so it came to pass that Housing First was invented and all homelessness was ended
- Distortions, confusions and exaggerations during the early 2000s
- Finland ‘ending homelessness through Housing First’ (it did, but it was a distinct Finnish idea, not something imported from the USA)

Dilution

- Imprecise implementation particularly in the US
- Beginnings of a new emphasis on fidelity in Housing First models
- The Spartacus/Life of Brian effect
- I'm Housing First, I'm Housing First
I'm Housing First and so's my wife...
- Housing First starts to look confused, open to criticism as lacking coherence
- Too many things are 'Housing First'



Realism

- By the mid 2010s debates around Housing First are settling down
- Better understanding of focus on recurrent (episodic) and sustained (chronic) homelessness among people with high and complex needs
- More rounded debates on role and capacity, strong results on housing sustainment
- More mixed on other outcomes, but successful overall in a range of contexts



Housing First
Guide
Europe

Attacks

- Subtle (British Hard Right)
 - Housing First is *good* because all homelessness is caused by **sin** (addiction) and **sickness** (mental illness) and not **system** failures (Gowan) or the inherent inequalities of Kleptocratic Capitalism
- Not at all Subtle (Far Right)
 - Government is always ineffective
 - Poor people are criminals
 - Homelessness still exists therefore Housing First does not work at all (yes, it really says that)



Housing First

- Housing First recreates the stability and standards of the best social housing, at least in theory, i.e. it provides stable, secure, adequate and affordable homes
- And provides support to enable that housing to be sustained, be it private rented sector or social housing
- And it achieves this 80-90% of the time for at least one year with the people it works with
- But results on addiction, mental health, social integration are mixed
- There are issues with systems integration
Housing First needs the right funding, the right housing supply and the right joint working to function well

You can't have
Housing First
without having
housing first

Changing the narrative on Housing First

- The standard metrics are not settling the debate
- Lots of reports of Housing First as not *entirely* successful
- Leaves too much room for doubt
- And there is still vagueness around the specific role of Housing First
- So, can we look at Housing First another way?



Lived experience

- Evaluations of 18 Housing First projects operating in the UK
- From 2010-23
- Five pieces of research
- 94 people using Housing First interviewed using the same semi-structured method
- 45% women overall (three services were Housing First for Women)
- Aged from 19 to over 60
- Ethnically and culturally diverse
- Very widespread experience of trauma, abuse, addiction, mental illness, care system, prison, homelessness services and of recurrent and sustained homelessness

Much more secure than I have been in the last eight years, to be honest. I was living on the streets for 18 months when I first lost my house. From here, there, everywhere. Now, to get in somewhere of my own, do you know, that I can actually call my home. Do you know what I mean? It's just amazing (2023)

You feel more human. When you live in the hostel...it's like an open prison. You cannot take anybody there... it's like freedom (2012)

Happiness

- Recording happiness statistically is difficult, how to define it in validated ways, the many variations between people in how they talk about it
- But you can ask people whether Housing First makes them feel happier
- And the results are often more positive than statistical analysis and outcome tracking using administrative data tends to suggest
- Problems remain, of course, ongoing treatment and support needs might be being met, but limiting illness and disability remain present and women are often at ongoing risk of domestic abuse
- But our overwhelming finding was that Housing First services generally made people feel better about life, happier than before Housing First arrived in their lives

I've always said, I just need my front door where I can have my bath and my kitchen, and I can keep it as tidy as I want. I know it's going to be like that when I get back. That's it: that's why I'm just so happy to actually, finally have that (2023)

Yes, I've never been so happy like I've been this last year because I've been doing the things on my own as well and people have been helping me a lot as well. I don't feel lonely with these people who've been helping me. I don't feel lonely because I can call them, they can call me (2014)

Relative success

- Establishing metrics to assess the effectiveness of homelessness services is difficult
- If binary (has homelessness ended yes/no; is an addiction still present yes/no) then outcome measures arguably don't allow enough time and space for a service working with a high cost, high risk population, also a focus on *ideal* outcomes
- Attempts to show that progress in homelessness services can be slow, variable and, above that success is best seen in relative terms have run into credibility problems, e.g. the Outcomes Star
- But people using Housing First can tell you whether life is better than it was before Housing First was in their lives and why that is the case
- Better is inherently individual, but a lot of 'better' may mean something

Yes, obviously it's got better - a lot better - because I am stable and I'm secure. No one can take that away from me; that's nice so that would be itself. But then I've had low points as well because I've had addiction and stuff that I've dealt with. Where I've not had medication, my mental health has been really bad, but it's getting - I'm in a lot better place now, so yes, it's got better (2022)

I feel better in myself as well you know, like I've cut down on the beer, they have changed my life to be honest, you know, getting out of [area] and keeping out of trouble (2020)

Unrealistic goals

- The flaw in staircase or linear residential treatment models was centred on people having to cross multiple hurdles to achieving a personal, sustainable, exit from homelessness
- Their risk of homelessness was ended because they had changed
- It's been pointed out (Hansen Lö fstrand and Juhila, 2012) that original American Housing First has the same logic, talk of 'graduating' from Housing First, it is slower, more human and does not blame people, but still fix the person to fix the homelessness
- But who is really, entirely independent? Who never does anything self-destructive? No-one.
- Progress can be gradual, partial or non-existent, but homelessness can still be stopped by Housing First, talking to people helps break a narrative of absolutes of 'homeless/not homeless' and Housing First sits in that space, it stops homelessness, but not everything else

Since I got a property and stuff, like I used to always drink and use it as a crutch... I don't drink as much since I got my property. They're making other things in my life positive, so I don't need to do that.(2018)

Yes, I'm on a script now, I'm on methadone. I'm reducing every couple of months so hopefully about another year I should be off methadone (2012)

Limits of Housing First

- Qualitative research reveals networks and relationships in a way that it is difficult to capture statistically
- Where Housing First lacks the right connections in housing, in health, mental health, addiction, criminal justice or in contexts where those services struggle with limited resources, it runs into problems
- More ICM than ACT, but even ACT requires joint working to function well, Housing First is a case management model, it needs to be at the core of an effective, collaborative network
- It needs to be able to refer up and refer down
- It needs to be adequately and sustainably resourced





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Thanks for your endurance