

RESEARCH DIGEST NO.5

HOUSING FIRST

JANUARY 2026



The research digests are among the EPOCH Practice resources provided to representatives of EU Member States and all stakeholders working to combat homelessness in Europe.

The digests aim to help policymakers and practitioners make use of academic research on homelessness.

Six digests will be published, covering various themes and disciplinary perspectives.

The fifth digest, dated January 2026, discusses the role of Housing First in addressing European homelessness exploring both the evidence in favour of Housing First and the criticisms of the approach.

This digest was written by Professor Nicholas Pleace and designed by the EPOCH Practice team.



**Co-funded by
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Financed by



Délégation interministérielle
à l'hébergement et à
l'accès au logement

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INTRODUCTION BY SAMARA JONES



Samara Jones has worked on homelessness and social justice issues both in Europe and Canada. She is based in Brussels and leads the Housing First Europe Hub. The Housing First Europe Hub is a partnership of organisations, initiated in 2016 by FEANTSA, the Y-Foundation (Finland) and several key partners including Rock Trust, Turning Point Scotland, Crisis, Focus Ireland, Housing First Netherlands, Stadsmissionen Sweden, the City of Lyon, and the social affairs ministries of France and Belgium. The Housing First Europe Hub now includes over 25 housing providers, governments, cities, researchers and foundations from across Europe and beyond. The Housing First Europe Hub promotes systems change to end and prevent homelessness based on the principles of Housing First, coordinates training programmes and research, and supports its partners to establish networks across Europe.

This Housing First research digest is a welcome and extremely useful synthesis; Housing First is one of the most studied and evaluated approaches to homelessness, because it is one of the few practices which is founded on a clear set of core principles, and tested in randomised control trials in multiple countries as the idea was gaining ground over 15 years ago. This early commitment to establishing an evidence base has been crucial to the acceptance of Housing First across vastly different social welfare and housing systems in Europe, North America and beyond.

Housing First is out of its infancy and childhood; it's a teenager now – with all of the advantages and disadvantages that come with adolescence. As a newcomer on the scene, Housing First needed to prove itself, and specifically, that it worked for people who had been long neglected or forgotten by other housing-led approaches to ending homelessness. Over the past 15 years we have seen, time and again, that individual people's homelessness can be ended with housing and support, and that when you start with the housing, first, and ensure the right kind of support is provided without coercion, without time limits, and in a trauma informed way, that a Housing First approach works for not just people with experience of long term rough sleeping and/or intense support needs, but more broadly for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

As a teenager, Housing First is both confident and more nuanced than it was 10 years ago; but it's not yet fully grown. The Housing First approach can be applied in programmes, but Housing First has the most impact when its values and principles inform comprehensive strategies to reduce and prevent homelessness, like in Finland and Scotland, and increasingly at local level in cities across Europe. Just like any teenager, Housing First still has a ways to go, and some growing to do, but just like any teenager, we should not only focus on what it needs to improve on, but also recognise the wisdom we can draw from this approach which has helped to re-frame how we think about addressing homelessness, by starting with housing, *first*.

1. HOUSING FIRST

- There is a **large international evidence base** on Housing First. Many of the studies that have been conducted are American or Canadian. This research digest focuses on **European research** and analysis of Housing First services and programmes.
- Housing First is the most significant change in homelessness policy and practice that has occurred in the last thirty years. The Housing First approach has proven effectiveness in ending long term and repeated homelessness among people with multiple and complex needs in **many European countries** and **beyond Europe**.
- Housing First is an **intensive, housing-led, service model**, that rapidly places people experiencing homelessness who have multiple and complex needs into a settled, adequate home and provides case management support to enable them to sustain an exit from homelessness.
- EU Member States use Housing First in different ways. **France** has focused on using the original North American model for people experiencing homelessness with a severe mental illness. **Finland** has built a unique version of Housing First that has changed homelessness policy and practice at strategic level, focused on people experiencing long term homelessness. However, European Housing First services tend to follow a **shared philosophy and core principles**.
- Housing First is effective in reducing long term and repeated homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. This can be measured in two ways, as **time spent living in housing** rather than living rough or in shelters and as maintaining a tenancy agreement or lease for **at least one year**. Between 70-90% of people using Housing First successfully exit homelessness.
- Gains in **wellbeing, health and social integration** have been reported by research on people using Housing First services.
- There is evidence from **multiple countries**, including several EU Member States, that Housing First is a cost effective approach.
- New models of Housing First which are aimed at specific groups of people experiencing homelessness who have multiple and complex needs, including Housing First for Women (**HF4W**) and Housing First for Youth (**HF4Y**) have had promising results. Housing First has the potential to contribute to effective **homelessness prevention**.
- Housing First can have its **effectiveness undermined** if it cannot get quick access to adequate, affordable and long term housing and if it is unable to fully coordinate with other services, including health, mental health, addiction, criminal justice services.
- Housing First needs to operate at a **sufficient scale** and have the right level of long-term funding if it is to be effective at strategic level in individual EU Member States and at pan EU level, in reducing long-term and repeated homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs.

2. HOUSING FIRST IN EUROPE

This research digest concentrates on European evidence on Housing First. The **Housing First Hub Europe** collates relevant **research**, provides examples of good practice and offers **guidance** on the design and delivery of Housing First services.

Housing First is designed to house someone as quickly as possible and to simultaneously provide the support they need to stay housed. Housing First has a set of **core principles**, also sometimes referred to as **'fidelity' to the original Housing First model**, first developed by **Sam Tsemberis** in **New York**. These core principles can be summarised as:

- Housing First services are generally designed for people **experiencing long term or repeated homelessness** associated with **multiple and complex needs**.
- **Housing is a human right**, and homelessness among people with multiple and complex needs can only be solved through the provision of adequate, affordable and settled housing.
- Flexible, **co-produced**, **strength-based** and **intensive case management** is at the core of Housing First service design. This means that the people providing and using Housing First work together to deliver the most effective route away from homelessness, within a framework of mutual respect. Workers in Housing First services have a low caseload, i.e. they work intensively with a small number of people.
- A **harm reduction** approach is taken, i.e. treatment is actively encouraged and supported, rather than requiring abstinence from drugs or alcohol, or making treatment compulsory.
- **Housing and support are separated**, once someone has been housed by a Housing First service, they can keep the housing after their use of Housing First support services stops.
- Support is flexible, adaptable and provided for as **long as is necessary**.

The detailed operation of Housing First **varies between EU Member States**.

In **Finland**, Housing First refers to **a unique, housing-focused, strategic level response to homelessness** that operates within an integrated, preventative framework. There are Finnish services similar to American Housing First, but these evolved separately and were designed as part of a network of preventative services (see **EPOCH Research Digest 4**), congregate supported housing and a social housing programme initially **targeted at long term homelessness**.

In France, a national programme **Un chez-soi d'abord** is designed primarily as an intervention for people experiencing homelessness with severe mental illness, following a **successful randomised control trial**. In **Denmark**, Housing First is also primarily aimed at people experiencing homelessness with mental health problems. Elsewhere, Housing First has, as in Finland, been focused on people experiencing long-term and repeated homelessness. This includes national government strategy in **Ireland** and **Scotland** and the development of Housing First led by the homelessness sector in **Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and England**.

However, while some variation exists in European Housing First, pan-European research has also reported that European Housing First services all tend to operate with reference to the same principles.

3. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF HOUSING FIRST

Housing First is widely regarded as successful because of a large, global, evidence base that has reported high levels of success for individual services and from two major randomised control trials. In Europe, the evidence base is smaller than for North America, but reports from multiple EU Member States are show consistent successes for Housing First services. The strengths of Housing First can be summarised as follows:

- Housing First is effective in reducing long term and repeated homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. This can be measured in two ways, as time spent living in housing, rather than living rough or in shelters and as maintaining a tenancy agreement or lease for at least one year. While there is some variation, Housing First services are typically reported as sustainably ending homelessness for between seven to nine out of every ten people they work with, a 70%-90% success rate in EU Member States and other European countries.
- There are improvements in health and wellbeing associated with Housing First services. The French Un chez-soi d'abord Housing First programme, has been shown to reduce the need for psychiatric services among people whose homelessness is associated with severe mental illness, alongside creating sustained exits from homelessness. There are many reports from research in which people using Housing First praise services and the different, co-productive nature of the support offered. European research also suggests better results in resilience and community integration for people using Housing First compared to some other types of homelessness service. In the USA, research has also indicated that Housing First can create a sense of security and belonging more effectively than other service models, because of the rapid provision of a settled home.
- There is research from the USA, UK, France and Spain, alongside studies of the distinctive Finnish Housing First strategy that indicate Housing First tends to be cost effective. Housing First is not a low cost model, but it is more effective at ending homelessness among people with multiple and complex needs than some other types of service. This means Housing First ends more long term and complex homelessness, per Euro spent, than some other service models with equivalent or sometimes higher costs.
- Housing First appears to have additional potential that can help address wider dimensions of homelessness. There is emerging evidence from North America and from Europe that Housing First for Women (HFW) services which provide safeguarding from domestic abuse and which are designed, operated and delivered by women, can be highly effective (see also EPOCH Research Digest 3 on Women's Homelessness).

Equally, research in Canada has suggested that **Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)**, which again offers specially tailored support for groups like young people who have had contact with child protection systems, may also be more effective than some existing services, with similar research on **HF4Y in the UK** also reporting positive findings. Housing First more generally has scope to be used as part of a more preventative approach to European homelessness, particularly in preventing homelessness among people known to be at high risk when they leave institutional or foster care (see also **EPOCH Research Digest 4 on Prevention**).

Housing First has been advocated as an effective, evidence based, way of reducing long term and repeated homelessness by **FEANTSA** and the **Finnish Y Foundation**, which established the **Housing First Hub Europe**. The **European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH)** advocates housing-led approaches to homelessness, that include Housing First. Housing First is government policy in **Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal** and for major cities in the **Netherlands**, as well as the distinctive policy seen in **Finland**. In Italy, through **Housing First Italia** and in **Sweden**, collaborations between the homelessness sector and universities have long advocated the use of Housing First and there have been similar collaborations with **Homeless Link** and **Crisis** in the UK. Homelessness services working in cities in **Czechia, Poland** and **Slovakia** have also developed Housing First, with some experiments also reported in **Greece**. Housing First is part of homelessness policy in **Norway, Scotland** and in cities in **Switzerland** as well as being endorsed by the **English** and **Welsh** governments, while also being advocated by **OECD**.

Housing First, like any service model, does have some operational limits and the evidence base on **European Housing First** and the **global evidence base** have indicated that:

- Housing First works by rapidly providing adequate, affordable and settled housing. This is inherently difficult in EU housing markets which are generally hyperinflated and which have been **failing for decades** to provide enough decent, low cost homes for rent or purchase. Social housing in Europe, which is not provided or supported by governments in all Member States, has also declined in scale over **the last thirty years**. Whenever Housing First cannot get timely access to suitable housing, its effectiveness is significantly undermined.
- Housing First is a case management approach, which both provides and arranges support, care and treatment, using either **intensive case management (ICM)**, or similar approaches, and **assertive community treatment (ACT)**. ICM Housing First relies heavily on good coordination and strong working relationships with other services. ACT Housing First has its own interdisciplinary teams but still requires good links with other services. This means that if **coordination** with welfare, health, social (work) services (adult social care), mental health, addiction and other services is poor, or those same services are **very under-resourced**, Housing First will face challenges in operating effectively.

- Housing First is still not well integrated into many EU Member State homelessness strategies (where these strategies exist) and is either scarce or not operational in much of the Eastern EU. While Housing First is at the core of homelessness policy debate EU level, the distribution of services is highly uneven. The biggest group of homelessness services in the EU are still emergency shelters and this means that Housing First does not yet have the depth and reach needed to systematically reduce long term and repeated homelessness across all of the EU.

Housing First has become the biggest news story in homelessness policy and practice for decades, because it can end long-term and repeated homelessness for most of the people it works with, deliver improvements to health and wellbeing and is also relatively cost effective. However, Housing First has long been subject to criticism and that criticism has intensified in recent years.

For some Europeans, Housing First reflects American cultural attitudes that centre on self-reliance. A concern exists that (North American) Housing First may risk reinforcing old, unevidenced, ideas like European homelessness only being 'caused' by individual mental illness or addiction, rather than being properly understood in a context of cascade failure in housing policies, increasing poverty and inadequate funding of public services at European level. However, the harshest criticism and in recent years and outright political rejection of Housing First, has occurred in North America. Recent claims about the outright 'failure' of Housing First in North America do not reflect and only make selective reference to the evidence base. In the US, there is clear evidence that veteran homelessness among people with multiple and complex needs was reduced through use of a Housing First model which is disregarded by these criticisms. Research indicates that rising homelessness among people with multiple and complex needs is linked to there being not enough Housing First in North America, rather than there being flaws within the Housing First model itself, something that has also been indicated within the EU by Danish research.

4. STRATEGIC USE OF HOUSING FIRST

Housing First must be scaled up across the EU in order to fulfil its potential. Research indicates that Housing First must be at the core of an integrated, preventative and housing-led homelessness strategy which:

- Guarantees that Housing First is proportionate to the entire population of people experiencing long-term and repeated homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. There are two dimensions to this, first Housing First needs to be able to meet the needs of the 'stock' population, i.e. everyone whose long-term or repeated homelessness has not been resolved. Second, over the longer term, Housing First must be sufficient to meet the needs of the 'flow' of people at risk of long term or repeated homelessness, which means realising the role of Housing First within the preventative dimensions of an integrated homelessness strategy. If Housing First services are too small in scale or have only short-term funding, their strategic role in ending European homelessness will not be fully realised.

- Ensures reliable and rapid access to an **affordable, adequate and settled home** within a suitable neighbourhood, i.e. avoiding areas with low levels of social cohesion and other risk factors. Sometimes this may mean housing appropriate for someone with a limiting illness or disability. Collaboration with the private rented sector and, ideally, with social housing providers (where available) is essential to achieving this.
- Allows Housing First services to refer 'up', i.e. when someone develops levels of treatment and support need that are beyond what Housing First is designed for (e.g. someone requires nursing care) and 'down' when someone no longer needs as much support (i.e. can live more or less independently). If a Housing First is operating without proper connections to other services and cannot refer 'up' or 'down', it **risks becoming overstretched**.
- Enable joint working across all forms of health and social services, including mental health and addiction, occupational therapy and personal (social services) care. Joint working should also extend to the criminal justice system, domestic abuse services, social and private landlords. Housing First **must be able to access** necessary treatment and support in a timely manner in order to operate effectively. As experience in Finland has repeatedly shown, **an integrated, housing-led and preventative strategy, with Housing First at its core**, not merely the presence of Housing First services, is essential if long-term and repeated homelessness in Europe is to be brought to an end.

Housing First must be **viewed in realistic terms** as while highly effective, it also has some limits. There is clear evidence that Housing First is an effective response to long-term and repeated homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. However, Housing First is not a solution to all forms of European homelessness, because people with multiple and complex needs are only an element of a **much larger social problem**. Again, Housing First also needs to be situated within a fully integrated, coordinated homelessness strategy and have access to the right housing supply if it is to reach its full potential. Housing First has proven effectiveness at global level and the widespread adoption of Housing First across EU Member States, other European countries and across the OECD reflects that operational and strategic strength.

