Homelessness Research and Policy Development: Examples from the Nordic Countries

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Abstract_ *The interaction between research and policy development has played an important role in the transformation of homelessness policies and services over the last decade. Evidence from research on Housing First programmes and interventions in North America has informed the development of experimental Housing First programmes in many European countries. Moreover, studies on the profiles of homeless people and patterns of service use have supported an ongoing transition from mainly emergency and temporary responses towards strategic approaches with a focus on long-term and permanent solutions. This article will focus on the Nordic countries, where there has been close interaction between research and policy development in the formation of national strategies and programmes. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, comprehensive national counts of homelessness have been carried out based on similar definitions and methodology and in Finland, monitoring of the extent and profiles of homelessness has been carried out for several years. In Denmark and Finland, national data have been used in the formation of national homelessness strategies that have been based on the Housing First principle, and data have been used to monitor developments in homelessness following implementation of these programmes. In Sweden, influential research on the staircase system has contributed to in-depth understanding of the unintended exclusion mechanisms that may sometimes be inherent in homelessness policies.*

Keywords_ *Homelessness research, policy development, strategic response, Housing First*

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Introduction

Homelessness is a complex and a persistent problem and an example of an extreme form of exclusion (Von Mahs, 2013). Considerable interaction between homelessness research and policy formation has taken place in many countries in recent years, as research has given a better understanding of the social mechanisms and dynamics behind homelessness and social exclusion, and documented the emergence of new approaches and advances in the evidence base on social interventions in the field of homelessness services.

However, it can generally be tricky to analyse the interplay between homelessness research and policy development. Policy development does not follow a linear path and research does not necessarily have a strategic focus on contributing to new policies and practices. Whilst new knowledge and evidence may be picked up in social policies and national programmes, both implementation barriers and structural barriers often mean that upscaling new social interventions and model projects and mainstreaming them into general social services is difficult.

The advanced 'social-democratic' welfare systems in the Nordic countries have in most cases been quite fast in picking up new trends in research and policy and after a brief overview of general trends in contemporary homelessness research, we shall use these countries as an example to study the interplay between research and policy formation in more detail. Research in the Nordic countries on both the outcomes of interventions and implementation research on policy programmes has given a deeper understanding of the mechanisms involved in these processes of knowledge diffusion and policy development.

Integrated Analytical Perspectives in the Research Literature

Recent developments in the theoretical understanding of homelessness largely follow the general synthesising trend of social theory. In the research literature, an understanding of homelessness from mainly structural or individualistic perspectives has been widely replaced by positions integrating these perspectives (Wolch and Dear, 1989; Quilgars *et al.,* 2008; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013). From a critical realist perspective, Fitzpatrick has argued that homelessness arises from the complex interplay between structural, systemic, relational and personal factors (Fitzpatrick, 2005; 2012). According to Fitzpatrick, these factors may interact differently in both time and place, leading also to a more dynamic and contingent understanding of homelessness. Adverse structural circumstances such as unemployment or the lack of affordable housing are likely to most adversely affect people with social vulnerabilities, such as people with mental illness, substance abuse problems and weak social ties.

The development of a more integrated and dynamic understanding of homelessness has also been expressed within the 'pathways theory', emphasising how homelessness should not necessarily be seen as the end point of a downward marginalisation process, as socially vulnerable individuals often experience several episodes of homelessness during their life course (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Shinn *et al.*, 1998; Anderson and Tulloch, 2000; Clapham, 2005; Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2006; Culhane *et al.*, 2007). In their paradigmatic study on shelter data in the US, Kuhn and Culhane (1998) identified different types of shelter users: the chronically homeless with complex psychosocial problems, long spells of homelessness and long-term stays in homeless shelters; the episodically homeless with equally complex problems and many repeated spells of homelessness with a circulation in and out of shelters, prisons, hospitals and periods of rough sleeping in between; and finally the transitionally homeless – the largest group amongst US shelter users – with few, short stays in shelters and less complex problems, their homelessness likely being caused by poverty and housing affordability problems (cf. Wagner and Gilman, 2012).

A Better Understanding of Welfare Policies and Interventions

A better understanding of the impact of welfare policies has also emerged, with growing evidence that homelessness in more extensive welfare systems is more concentrated among people with psychosocial vulnerabilities, whilst homelessness in less extensive welfare systems affects wider groups of poor people due to housing affordability problems, such as the transitionally homeless in the US (Shinn, 2007; Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007; Toro, 2007; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015). As welfare systems have come under pressure in many countries, there has also been an increased focus on the unintended consequences of welfare reforms for socially vulnerable groups due to, for instance, reductions in welfare benefits or the liberalisation of housing systems (Hedin *et al.*, 2011; Lind 2016).

In particular, changes have taken place in the understanding of homelessness interventions. In their recent volume on Housing First, Padgett *et al.* (2016) describe the paradigm shift from Treatment First to Housing First and how the latter has informed policy changes originating in the US and now spreading throughout Europe. By now, the Housing First approach has been incorporated into strategic responses to homelessness in large scale-national homelessness strategy programmes (Denmark and Finland) and in large-scale experimental programmes in Canada and France as well as in smaller social experimentation projects in many other EU Member States. Although debates continue over its merits in relation to particular subgroups of homeless people (Kertesz *et al.*, 2009; see also Pleace, 2011), experimental research, mainly from the US, Canada and France, as well as evaluation research from other countries, widely documents the effectiveness of

the key components of the Housing First approach: an early stabilisation of the housing situation by giving access to permanent, independent housing, and providing intensive, flexible social support following evidence-based intervention methods such as Assertive Community Treatment or Intensive Case Management, which can be differentiated according to the intensity of support needs (Tsemberis *et al.*, 2004; Coldwell and Bendner, 2007; Nelson *et al.*, 2007; Tsemberis, 2010).

However, in many countries, the Treatment First approach remains the predominant approach to rehousing, and research on national strategies and other large-scale Housing First programmes confirms that mainstreaming the Housing First approach into general social and homelessness services not only involves a fundamental mind-set shift in social services and the reorganisation of social services but is also hampered by major structural barriers, as shortages of affordable housing for low-income groups intensify in North American and European cities.

A Look at the Nordic Countries

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) all belong to the social-democratic welfare regime and have some of the world's most extensive welfare systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Most of these countries have been relatively fast at picking up new approaches in homelessness policy and services. The most advanced examples of mainstreaming Housing First into general welfare policies are found in Denmark and Finland, where the Housing First approach has been the overall principle of large national homeless strategies. Also in Norway, recent policy development has incorporated elements of the Housing First approach. Only in Sweden, with only a few smaller 'model projects', has the Housing First approach not taken root to the same extent as in the other countries, likely due to the strong presence of the staircase model and stronger barriers to accessing ordinary housing for socially vulnerable people following the liberalisation of the social housing sector in Sweden.

In all four countries, we also find relatively advanced approaches to the measurement and collection of data on homelessness, and we find examples of how policy development and the monitoring of homelessness – through national homelessness counts and evaluation research on homelessness programmes – have interacted closely. This research also provides insights into the barriers and challenges to the development of integrated homeless policies even in the context of these advanced welfare states. Moreover, research shows how specific policies vary across these countries, which otherwise belong to the same welfare state cluster, leading to differences in the patterns of homelessness that can likely be linked to differences in welfare and housing policies.

The Context of the Social Democratic Welfare System

Although the Nordic countries are generally characterised by a relatively low level of social inequality and an extensive welfare system, there are considerable differences across these countries in both social and housing policies that are important for understanding differences in the patterns and profiles of homelessness, and in homeless policies. Welfare systems in the Nordic countries, as in most other countries, are undergoing continuous reform to adapt to ongoing pressures to finance welfare services. This process started long before the international financial crisis but it has only been reinforced since then. In some cases, this has led to growing divergence in welfare systems across the Nordic countries.

Housing systems, in particular, diverge across the Nordic countries, where differences have widened due to reforms in recent decades. Norway stands out in the comparison of the countries. Norwegian housing policy is based on the homeownership ideology (Bengtsson, 2013). Whereas Denmark, Finland and Sweden have relatively large social rental sectors, Norway has a high rate of owner-occupied housing and a much lower share of social housing (Bengtsson, 2013). Moreover, the social housing sectors have been developing in different directions. Even though we can see a strengthened homeownership policy even in countries like Sweden, there is still a relatively large rental market in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The social housing sector in Sweden, in particular, has undergone considerable reform and liberalisation, where general waiting list systems and targeted allocation systems have been widely abolished (Hedin *et al.*, 2011; Sahlin, 2015). By contrast, the social housing sectors in Denmark and Finland still operate on a more traditional 'social-democratic' basis, where access is widely regulated by waiting lists and allocation systems. For example, in Denmark, municipalities have a right to allocate part of the vacancies in public housing to people in acute need of housing due to social problems. These differences set the context for homelessness policies and have broadly affected the possibilities of implementing housing-led policies, such as the Housing First approach, which has turned out to be more difficult to implement in Sweden than in Denmark or Finland.

In all Nordic countries, an accelerating process of urbanisation is occurring, with economic and population growth concentrated in capital regions and other larger urban areas. In all four countries there are signs of an increasing shortage of affordable housing in larger cities, and the provision of publicly-subsidized affordable housing – once a hallmark of the Scandinavian welfare state – is increasingly coming under pressure.

Advanced Data Collection and the Monitoring of Policies

In all four countries, homelessness is monitored by national homelessness counts that provide information on the extent of homelessness and the profiles of homeless people. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, homelessness counts are carried out using the same basic methodology, although with some variation in the definitions used. In Finland, the methodology used in homelessness enumeration is different from the other countries.

The national homelessness counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden are conducted as an extended service based on a one-week count. The first of these counts was conducted in Sweden as early as 1993, followed by Norway in 1996, while the first Danish count was only conducted in 2007. In addition to homelessness services, a wide range of other social and health services also participate, and each unit fills out individual questionnaires for each homeless person they are in contact with or know to be homeless during the count week. Multiple use of services (double counts) are controlled for by using personal numbers or other individual information, such as initials and birth dates. As these counts are quite extensive, they are not conducted every year. In Sweden, the counts have been conducted about every five years and in Norway every third or fourth year, whereas in Denmark they have been conducted every second year since 2007.

In Finland, homelessness enumerations are conducted once every year, but the methodology is different from the other Nordic countries, as the Finnish count is an enumeration of homelessness on one single day, based on a survey administered to a wide range of homeless services and other welfare services.

Although the methodology used in the homeless counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden is similar, there is some divergence in the definitions used. In all four countries (including Finland) it is not only rough sleepers and shelter users that are included; people staying temporarily with family or friends (couch surfers) are also defined as homeless to the extent that they are in contact with social services. The definition used in Sweden is somewhat broader than in the other countries, as it includes a wider group of people who have second-hand accommodation contracts that are often long-term, but non-permanent, whereas these groups are not included in the definitions in Denmark, Finland or Norway. This difference is not only a definitional matter but reflects the more widespread use of the staircase model in Sweden, which has led to the emergence of a secondary housing market of people who do not have ordinary leases but are in training flats, with the contract often held by social services and with behavioural conditions attached to eventually getting a permanent contract as a primary lease holder (Sahlin, 2007; Knutagård, 2009).

In the first national count in Sweden in 1993, almost 10,000 homeless people were counted. In 1999, a new national count was done and this time the homeless numbers had dropped to 8,440. The definition of homelessness had narrowed slightly. At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of 2000 there was an ongoing debate among different actors on the causes of homelessness. Different positions were taken by different researchers and agencies. At the time, homelessness was very much seen as a result of individuals having problems with addiction and mental health. Several researchers contested this view presented by the National Board of Health and Welfare and other official agencies. This also led to a critique of the counts, especially the underlying questionnaire and the questions that were asked (Sahlin, 1996; Thörn, 2004). The critique from researchers led to a closer collaboration between the National Board of Health and Welfare and the research community. The following two national counts changed the definition once more with the ambition of being comparable with the ETHOS definition. The Swedish definition of homelessness was thereby broadened, reflecting the fact that a large share of the Swedish homeless population live as tenants in apartments sublet from the social services and dispersed in ordinary housing areas. This critique of the secondary housing market and the staircase model has been one of the most important debates in the homelessness field in Sweden in the last decade (cf. Sahlin, 1996; 2005; Löfstrand, 2005; Knutagård, 2009). The reason for including this situation in the homelessness definition is the instability and non-permanency of the situation. Tenants in the secondary housing market can easily lose their lease if they do not comply with the rules. In practice, tenants can be evicted from their apartments within a day or a week. Research also shows that there are a lot of homeless families within the secondary housing market. This leads to the risk of having children evicted from their homes. Even though the households live in apartments in ordinary housing areas, they still live in precarious situations.

Despite these variations in definition and methodology, commonalities in the approaches of Denmark, Norway and Sweden have enabled comparisons of the main trends across the countries. In 2008, a comparison of homelessness in Denmark, Norway and Sweden showed that, even when adjusting for the wider definition of homelessness in the Swedish count (and adjusting for population size), the overall level of homelessness was higher in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark. Moreover, this comparison showed that whilst the level of homelessness was of a similar size in the largest cities (Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo and Gothenburg), the level of homelessness in medium-sized towns was, in most cases, higher in Sweden than in similar towns in Denmark and Norway. The authors attributed this finding to a combination of the wider use of the staircase model in Sweden and the liberalisation of the Swedish social housing sector, leading to a higher level of housing exclusion even in medium-sized Swedish towns than in similar towns in Denmark and Norway (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2008).

The most recent counts in all three countries have shown that the level of homelessness is moderately increasing in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The overall level is still higher in Sweden than in Denmark and Norway. In Denmark (population 5.7 million) the count in 2015 showed that 6,138 people were homeless – up from 4,998 in 2009, 5,290 in 2011 and 5,820 in 2013 (Benjaminsen and Lauritzen, 2015). In Norway (population 5 million), 6,259 people were homeless in 2012 – an increase from 6,091 in 2008, 5,496 in 2005 and 5,200 in 2003 (Dyb and Johannesen, 2013). The results from the 2016 count in Norway are not yet available. The recent increases in Denmark and Norway are likely attributable to a combination of factors, such as the increasing lack of affordable housing in larger cities and a particular increase in youth homelessness (Dyb and Johannesen, 2013; Rambøll and SFI, 2013; Benjaminsen and Lauritzen, 2015).

In Sweden, the latest count is from 2011 and is now five years old. It showed that about 34,000 people were homeless in a population of 9.4 million at that time. However, this strong increase compared to earlier mappings in Sweden was partly due to the widening of the definition. 13,900 people were included who were in long-term but not permanent housing, typically in the secondary housing market (Socialstyrelsen, 2012).

The methodology used in homeless enumeration is different in Finland, such that direct comparisons cannot be made between Finland and the other countries. However, the Finnish data show a very different trend, as a steady decline in homelessness has been documented over a long period; homelessness decreased from about 18,000 homeless people in 1987 – when statistics began – to about 8,000 homeless people in 2004. Since then, reductions have continued but have been relatively small. In 2014, the national statistics centre recorded 7,107 homeless people, of whom the majority were staying temporarily with family or friends (ARA survey, 2014). This can be compared to a total Finnish population of 5.5 million people in 2014. This development can widely be attributed to an intensive focus on reducing long-term homelessness in Finland, backed by a comprehensive national strategy with substantial resources devoted to establishing new housing units and converting shelters into permanent housing for long-term homeless people. Although the numbers cannot be directly compared with Denmark, Norway and Sweden, they indicate that the level of homelessness in Finland has dropped from a level more comparable to that of Sweden to a level more similar to the levels in Denmark and Norway. This may reflect Finland's gradual move away from a mainly staircase-based approach towards the Housing First approach, which was explicitly named as the main principle in the Finnish strategy.

Policy Developments – the Path Dependency of National Programmes

Finland was the first amongst the Nordic countries to initiate a large-scale national homelessness strategy inspired by Housing First. The Finnish programme was initiated in 2008. After Finland, Denmark was also an early starter in the introduction of Housing First, starting up a national strategy that effectively began in 2009. Sweden started up its first small-scale Housing First pilots in 2010, but it was not until 2012 that Norway started up Housing First services. By 2015, 14 municipalities had a Housing First pilot in Norway. In Sweden, the same number of pilots took five years to launch. One explanation of this development is that the start-up of Housing First projects in Norway was partly financed by The Norwegian State Housing Bank (Husbanken). In Sweden, local actors or change agents have taken on the model without any funding from the Government or other actors (Knutagård and Kristiansen, 2013).

Although previous homelessness strategies in Sweden and Norway had many goals that were similar to those of the strategies in Denmark and Finland, implementation of the strategies has turned out differently. Thus, the introduction of Housing First services is reliant on the diffusion of the model by change agents, and on their ability to translate the model into the existing system. Funding is, of course, a key ingredient. For instance, in the Finnish strategy, enough financial resources were allocated both to convert old shelters into congregate housing and to buy, renovate and build new apartments in order to reduce homelessness. The lack of financial resources from the national level has slowed down the pace of diffusion in Sweden. In the following section, we shall examine differences between the countries and the interplay between policy formation and research in more detail, discussing both commonalities and differences. However, we will narrow down the comparison to focus mainly on Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

Even though there are many similarities between the Nordic countries from a welfare regime perspective, the welfare systems differ, and the housing systems and their housing policy, in particular, differ significantly (Bengtsson, 2013). Bengtsson and his colleagues argue that the different paths the Nordic countries have chosen can be understood as examples of a *path-dependent* housing policy. The concept of path dependency is used to describe how early decisions will affect decisions you make later (Mahoney, 2000). In this way, the path becomes more and more difficult to break away from, since too many other parts have been added and it is therefore costly to change course.

The National Homelessness Strategy in Finland – a Strategic Response

Homelessness has been a matter of concern in Finland just like the other Nordic countries. Long-term homelessness is becoming a particular concern. Over the years, the number of homeless immigrants and young people has increased. One of the more specific groups in the homelessness population in Finland is persons that have had contact with the criminal justice system; there tends to be a gap between leaving prison and being able to get help from social services with housing and other supports. The same situation applies to clients that have been in rehab or other treatment institutions. The result is often a relapse into drugs and criminal behaviour. The costs for the individual client are huge, and so is the cost for society (Pleace *et al.*, 2016). Investing in preventative homelessness services is therefore a good strategy.

Before 2008, when Finland launched its first homelessness strategy with the explicit focus on Housing First services, the country organised most of its homelessness work in accordance with the staircase model. Homeless clients had to advance step-by-step in order to show that they were housing ready. During this period, Finland also used large hostels and other forms of temporary housing that were run down and in bad condition. This was especially true for the large-scale shelters in Helsinki.

Looking back at how homeless services have been delivered historically in Finland, the shift to a Housing First strategy is quite extraordinary. Emergency housing has almost disappeared since the 1970s. Even though it is difficult to compare the statistics of the Nordic countries, Finland is the only country that shows a decline in homelessness. In the course of the first strategy's implementation (PAAVO I), long-term homelessness decreased by 28 percent (Pleace *et al.*, 2015). In 2015, at the end of the second strategy (PAAVO II), for the first time fewer than 7,000 people were homeless, and long-term homelessness had dropped by 35 percent (equivalent to 1,345 people). The targets of the two strategies were very ambitious. The first strategy had the goal of halving long-term homelessness by 2011, while the second strategy aimed to eliminate long-term homelessness by 2015. Even though the strategy did not succeed with the goal, the reduction of long-term homelessness is still impressive in a time when pressure on the housing market is increasing. The Government's new action plan has a focus on prevention, but also on building new dwellings. The goal is to build or allocate 2,500 dwellings by 2019 for people that are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.[1]

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1 www.miljoministeriet.fi/en-US/Latest_news/Shift_towards_prevention_in_reducing_hom(39553)

The key to the reduction of homelessness in Finland is primarily the Government's decision to convert emergency shelters into communal units. This decision made it possible to transform a temporary system quickly – a system that often became a long-term solution for homeless people, inspired by the Housing First logic. The initial conversion of shelters into communal units is one of the aspects that makes the Finnish version of Housing First a bit different to the original model. The Pathways to Housing model is based on a scattered-site principle, where apartments are scattered in the ordinary housing market in contrast to the mainly congregate housing of Finland's first homelessness strategy. The findings showed high housing retention rates in the congregate housing too (Pleace *et al*, 2015). In the evaluation of the Finnish Housing First programme, scattered-site models had the highest housing retention rates, even though the congregate versions also worked for many where the treatment is separated from the housing. Even more important to the Finnish success is the focus on building, buying and renovating apartments. This has been made possible due to the financial resources invested in the strategy (Pleace *et al.*, 2016).

The success of the strategies in Finland relies on coordination at different levels – from central government to faith-based and other organisations. The Y-foundation, which buys apartments to rent them to households in need, has been an important actor.[2] An overall conclusion is the importance of institutional entrepreneurs that have the power and position– in collaboration with other change agents – to change the mind-sets and institutional logic from a staircase logic to the principle of housing as a basic human right and a precondition for making other life changes (Hardy and Maguire, 2013; Thornton and Ocasio, 2013).

Interplay between Policy Development and Monitoring Research: the Danish National Homelessness Strategy

In Denmark, there has been considerable development in homelessness policies over the last decade. Following the first national homelessness count that took place in 2007, Denmark adopted its national homelessness strategy in 2008, with a programme period from 2009 to 2013, succeeded by a follow-up programme from 2014 to 2016 (Hansen, 2010; Benjaminsen, 2013). The strategy has been monitored at the individual level with outcome data and at an aggregate level (nationally and

2 The Y-Foundation is a major provider of social housing in Finland. The Foundation was established in 1985 by different cities in Finland and organisations such as the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the Finnish Red Cross and the Finnish Construction Trade Union, among others. See www.ysaatio.fi/in-english/

in municipalities) with data from national homelessness counts carried out every second year since 2007. Thus, the Danish case is an example of relatively advanced interplay between policy development and data collection.

From the very beginning, the national strategy had Housing First as its overall principle, based on emerging evidence from international research on the merits of this approach. A main part of the programme was developing and testing evidence-based floating support methods (Assertive Community Treatment, Intensive Case Management and Critical Time Intervention) in municipal social services, with funding provided from the central government. Housing for the programme was widely based on public housing, where municipalities have the right to use one in four vacancies for people in acute housing need due to social problems. However, as a housing-ready approach was the norm in housing allocation policies in many municipalities, a mind-set shift was often needed to change the practice of housing allocation to the Housing First approach. Although not followed by the same rigorous experimental methods as large-scale Housing First programmes in Canada and France, an outcome monitoring system measured the situation of the approximately 1,000 people who went through the programme. The evaluation research showed that the Housing First approach was widely successful at rehousing homeless people with complex support needs, with high housing retention rates similar to those found in other Housing First projects in both Europe and the US. The strategy was succeeded by a follow-up programme aimed at mainstreaming Housing First into municipal social services, not only in the municipalities that took part in the first programme but also in new municipalities joining the programme.

Despite the ambitious national strategy programme, homelessness in Denmark has increased since 2009. In the national homelessness count in 2009, 4,998 people were recorded as homeless over the period of a week, but this number had increased to 6,138 people in 2015 (Benjaminsen and Lauritzen, 2015). The increase has been greatest in larger cities, where the shortage of affordable housing is most severe, but the most recent count also shows signs of an increase in several medium-sized cities, where a lack of affordable housing is also emerging. Count data at the municipal level reveal how transformations in homelessness patterns emerged over the period. A particularly strong increase took place in suburban municipalities in the Copenhagen area – mainly in lower-income, western suburbs that were increasingly affected by the housing shortage in the city. A strong increase was also recorded in Denmark's second largest city, Aarhus, where homelessness more than doubled in the period. A decade ago, the level of homelessness in Aarhus was more similar to other larger provincial towns, such as Aalborg and Odense, but in 2015 the level (relative to the population size) was more similar to the level in the Copenhagen area. This transformation is likely

a consequence of the rapid population and economic growth in the Aarhus area that has put pressure on the local housing market, with an increasing shortage of affordable housing as a consequence.

The national homelessness counts in Denmark have also documented a strong increase in youth homelessness in recent years, as the number of young homeless people (18 – 24 years of age) almost doubled from 2009 to 2015: from 633 to 1,172. The profiles show that young homeless people have largely the same high share of mental illness and substance abuse problems. About half have a mental illness and three out of four young homeless people have either a mental illness or a substance abuse problem. The count also shows that the majority of young homeless people are couch surfers staying temporarily with family and friends, whereas fewer stay in homeless shelters and very few young homeless people are sleeping rough.

The monitoring data at both the aggregated level, from the national homelessness counts, and the individual outcomes of interventions in the strategy help understand the apparently mixed results of the Danish programme. Outcome data from the national strategy show that Housing First interventions are successful for the large majority of homeless people that have received housing and support (Rambøll and SFI, 2013). However, at the same time, aggregate data at the national and municipal level from the national homelessness counts show that changes in the overall patterns of homelessness in Denmark are mainly related to the impact of more general structural transformations in society. Thus, the strategy contributed to the introduction of more effective and evidence-based interventions in social services. However, general policy and welfare reforms set the context of more specific programmes, such as the national homelessness strategy, as the increasing shortage of affordable housing and reductions in social assistance benefits for certain groups are the main barriers to scaling up and mainstreaming Housing First in general social services at the local level.

Housing and Homelessness Policies in Sweden – the Nordic Stronghold of the Staircase Model

From an optimistic perspective, it is evident that research has had an influence on how homelessness policies in Sweden have changed rhetorically over the past decade. Evidence of research results from Housing First, for example, can be seen in documents like action plans, guidelines, strategies and other policy documents at a national, regional and local level. A more pessimistic perspective can conclude, however, that homelessness research has had very little impact on homelessness policies at a national governmental level. From this perspective, Housing First initiatives can be viewed as shop window projects that exist on a small scale next to the

ordinary way of organising homelessness services through the staircase model (Knutagård, 2015; Sahlin, 2015). In many ways, homelessness disappeared as a social problem in Sweden after the big Million Programme launched by the Government in the mid-1960s.[3] At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, homelessness reappeared. At that time, homelessness was described as the 'new homelessness'. From a Scandinavian perspective, this related, first, to the emerging phenomenon of homeless women and later to the emerging phenomena of homeless migrants and homeless families (Järvinen, 1993; 2004).

Critique of the staircase model and the secondary housing market

Research on homelessness services in Sweden had shown for a long time that the staircase model had several problems. It had shown that close cooperation between social services and housing companies led to more homeless people outside the secondary housing market (Sahlin, 1996). This is a paradox, since one would assume that cooperation would lead to better services and better help for homeless people. Instead, mechanisms of exclusion were triggered. Another study showed that homeless clients were re-categorised by the services in order to be able to evict them (Löfstrand, 2005). Social services should be careful not to evict children. If the parents are divorced and the child lives with both parents off and on, the child will become homeless if one of the parents is evicted. But if the parent is re-categorised as a single household, the problem is solved on paper. Another study showed that the staircase model led to so-called institutional loops, where the homeless individual got stuck in the system of different steps to get an apartment of their own (Knutagård, 2009). One reason for this is that the individual's housing problem was redefined as an addiction or mental health problem, so the individual had to deal with that issue first before getting a flat of their own. But, while staying at a shelter, the individual then developed new problems that demanded new services and housing options – like a boarding house, supported housing, a category house or a training flat – in order to become housing ready. The study also showed that the different housing alternatives created a rendering process, where individuals got excluded from the category house for not belonging to the right category. Even though the category house was initially available for any homeless client, the rendering process led to a redefinition of both the category house and the categories of people accepted into it.

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3 The Million Programme was a large-scale public housing programme. The Social Democratic Party launched the program in 1965 and it finished in 1974. The idea was to build a million new homes in order to deal with the extreme housing shortage and poor housing standards. This very strategic response to a housing shortage was, in many ways, a very brave and radical programme. Some of the Million Programme areas have created serious problems for socio-economic segregation, but these effects were difficult to foresee. Many of the Million Programme areas, however, are very well managed (Hall and Vidén, 2005).

The Swedish homelessness strategy

Since 2002, the National Board of Health and Welfare has funded local projects to address homelessness. It was not until 2007 that the Swedish Government launched its homelessness strategy called: *Homelessness: Multiple Faces, Multiple Responsibilities*. The strategy had four objectives:

1. Everyone has to be guaranteed a roof over their head and be offered further coordinated action based on their individual needs.
2. The number of women and men who have been admitted to, or registered at a prison or treatment unit, or have supported accommodation or are staying in care homes and do not have any accommodation arranged before being discharged has to decrease.
3. Entry into the ordinary housing market has to be facilitated for women and men who are in housing ladders, training flats or other forms of accommodation provided by social services or other actors.
4. The number of evictions has to decrease and no children are to be evicted.

The written strategy shows that previous research has been taken into account. This is not done explicitly, but implicitly via previous reports conducted by the National Board of Health and Welfare. Three important markers are of interest here. First, the secondary housing market is used as an accepted term. The concept was coined by Professor Ingrid Sahlin of the University of Lund in the mid-1990s. Secondly, the strategy discusses the challenges and limitations with the staircase model and, finally, it announces Housing First as an alternative model that has received international attention but needs to be tried out in a Swedish context. The strategy also acknowledges that many landlords do not accept social assistance as a steady income and that this excludes people receiving assistance from getting a rental contract in the ordinary housing market. The strategy notes the need for action in order to combat this barrier.

The national strategy was evaluated, with the conclusion that the objectives of the strategy had not been met (Denvall *et al.*, 2011). Some of the recommendations that were presented in the evaluation report were very much in line with previous research. The evaluation recommended that a new housing policy be developed with a clear focus on housing provision. Another recommendation was that a new strategy encompasses a Housing First initiative on a national level in order to try the model in a Swedish context.

Housing First comes on the scene

The concept of Housing First was around already at the beginning of 2000 when a public investigation presented its final report in 2001 (SOU, 2001). It was not until after Lund University held a conference on Housing First in November 2009, in order to promote the testing of the model, that a number of municipalities started up Housing First pilots. Since then, Housing First initiatives have started in around 15 municipalities. All of the pilots show housing retention rates similar to other international projects. In the municipality of Helsingborg, the housing retention rate has been up to 90 percent. The insecurity of the staircase model has been replaced by ontological security for many of the former homeless clients. The development of small Housing First services in different municipalities resembles the development in the UK but differs radically from the strategic implementation of Housing First services through national strategies in Denmark, Finland and, to some extent, Norway. An interesting result so far is that even though the pilots are quite different in their local adaptation of the Housing First model, they share the same core principles from the original Pathways to Housing model, and they seem to lead to similar outcomes.

However, looking back at how Swedish housing policy has changed, it is clear that the former idea of housing as a basic human right has been left behind in favour of housing as a commodity that the market can provide and the idea that the market can regulate itself (cf. Dorling, 2015). The research on homelessness shows that the liberalisation of Swedish housing policy has had a major impact on, and has accelerated the housing exclusion of socially vulnerable groups. Together with the traditionally strong position of the staircase approach in Sweden, this is a major explanation of why Sweden did not see the formation of a large-scale national programme based on Housing First, like its two neighbouring Nordic countries, Denmark and Finland.

Conclusion

Research on homelessness has advanced considerably in recent years. A better understanding of the dynamics of homelessness and the interplay between structural, systemic, interpersonal and individual factors has emerged. A paradigm shift in the understanding of homelessness interventions is still taking place as the evidence on the merits of the Housing First model is growing still stronger, challenging the former paradigm of the Treatment First model. The spread of Housing First to more and more countries signifies a considerable diffusion between new research evidence and developments in practice and policy formation.

However, research and policy developments do not always go hand in hand smoothly. Especially in a situation where an old paradigm is challenged, the interplay between research, policy development and practice in social services is complex, and the extent to which new knowledge is transformed into actual policy and practice depends on various factors. Ambiguities of research, structural barriers, institutionalised interests and barriers to changing mind-sets often explain why the relationship between new knowledge and policy formation is far from linear. To change institutionalised practises takes time, and the comparison of policy developments in the Nordic countries shows that to understand such transformations we need to take into account path dependency on previous policy developments and reforms of welfare and housing policies.

The case of the Nordic countries illustrates the interaction between research, practice and policy formation in the context of a welfare state that has been relatively open to new trends. Thus, the advanced Nordic welfare states were relatively quick to pick up new approaches to homelessness as the emerging Housing First approach started spreading from the US to Europe. Finland was the first of the Nordic countries to incorporate Housing First into general homelessness policies, and both Denmark and Finland have developed comprehensive national homelessness strategies with Housing First as the key principle. Sweden is the exception, as Housing First has not taken root there to the same extent as in the other countries, and only smaller model projects based on Housing First have emerged there. The stronghold of the staircase approach in Sweden in combination with the liberalisation of the Swedish housing sector are likely explanations for the higher barriers to incorporating Housing First into Swedish homelessness policies. Yet, despite this variation across the countries, it is increasingly challenging for municipalities in the Nordic countries to provide housing for socially vulnerable groups.

The comparison across the Nordic countries shows that the traditional social-democratic welfare state model and the high level of success of the Nordic countries in providing housing for their citizens cannot be taken for granted, as reforms of welfare and housing policies – in combination with structural factors, such as the increasing shortage of affordable housing – create new exclusion mechanisms that cannot be resolved within the domain of homelessness policies but, rather, require wider societal responses.

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