

The Finnish National Programme to reduce long-term homelessness

Maryse Marpsat

INSEE

Pascal Noblet

Ministry of Ecology, Transportation and Housing

1 A few remarks on the Finnish long-term homelessness reduction programme 2008-2011

This programme is inspired by the "Housing First" approach, as opposed to the "scale of transition" approach.

The definition of homelessness and long-term homelessness

First the Finnish report reminds us that "a person is defined as homeless only when they apply for services within the public sector such as applying for a home or for services for people with intoxicant use problems" (p. 8). Since the proportion of homeless people who do not apply for services may be different from one country to another (and depends, among other things, on the development of services) it would be interesting to have an idea of this proportion (through qualitative data such as in-depth interviews or through quantitative data such as coverage surveys). It is not impossible that the long-term homeless are in higher proportion among those who do not apply for services.

On the other hand, the situations taken into account for the definition of homelessness cover a large range since people living temporarily with relatives and acquaintances due to lack of housing are also counted as homeless.

To have a clear perspective it would help knowing if the number of homeless people on one given year is the number of people who applied for services at least once in the year or those who were still homeless at a given date (the way the survey is completed is not quite clear: is it the state of the service providers' files, and if this is so are they regularly updated?).

In the report it would be interesting to have this structure of the (official) homeless population used to precise a number of conclusions. For example, p.7, about the reduction of the total number of homeless people between 1987 and 1996, we would like to know if this decrease has been the same for all the subpopulations (it seems to be the case as shown in the graph in Appendix 2, but it would be easier to read if the evolution of the various components was also shown).

In the long-term homelessness reduction programme, long-term homelessness is defined in rather a vague manner (p. 13), as "a person whose homelessness has become prolonged and

chronic, or is threatening to become chronic, because normal housing approaches have not worked, and because there have been insufficient housing solutions tailored to individual needs". This enables the various municipalities to give it different concrete definitions adapted to their situations, but makes more difficult the evaluation of national results, as Volker Busch-Geertsema has remarked.

The programme and its implementation

One of the very interesting points of this programme is that it deals not only with the "long-term homeless" (whatever their definition) but also with the prevention of homelessness. A programme which aimed at reducing homelessness once people are homeless and not at preventing homelessness occurring to them would suffer from long-term blindness.

The disappearance of dormitories which is aimed at is also quite positive, though of course alternative solutions should be planned so that no one is on the street while the new dwellings are built.

It seems that the estimated number of housing places to complete in two years (2011-2012) is generally higher than the number completed in the first three years of the programme (p.17). Does the number of places "nearly completed" enable to support this estimate? In the same table, why has the target been increased? Because of funding opportunities?

It would also be interesting to know what ARA has financed in previous years and not after the programme started (what goals have shifted).

In the evaluation of the project, it would be interesting to know if one type of housing works better for the long-term homeless or if a diversity should be aimed at, for example on the issue of grouped housing with support (such as the French *maisons relais*) or of scattered housing.

Other questions

In Finland, are the young homeless more likely to have been in care during their childhood (either in residential care or foster families) as it is in France and many other countries? If so, wouldn't a programme targeting young people in care when they exit that situation be useful?

In several countries people who are housed after a long spell of homelessness experience a series of difficulties such as boredom, the impossibility to establish a new social network, etc. It must have been foreseen in the Finnish case since support is provided. Could we have more details about the successes and failures of that support?

Two other questions relate to the transferability of the Finnish program to other national contexts.
 - in France, the trends in housing market, in Paris and most other large cities, show the increase of rents in the private sector, and a rate of housing expenses which is increasing for the poorest. The housing issue is not only crucial for the homeless, but also for a large number of people, and should be solved for everybody, the DALO law (about the enforceable right to housing) being one step towards this goal, though its implementation is not always easy. More generally, in a large

country (in terms of its number of inhabitants) such as France, would it be more difficult to implement similar programs because of the dimensions of the problem, of the need to delegate, the difficulty for all the partners to meet, etc. (for example, the sample size of the next homeless survey, due in 2012, will be larger than the estimated number of homeless in some countries).

- another issue which was only raised in the contributions of the Netherlands and that of the Feantsa is the issue of undocumented migrants.

The measurement of homelessness and housing hardship in France

A large number of statistical sources exist already, some developed by the National Institute of Statistics (the INSEE) such as the Housing survey, the Census, the national survey on homelessness; some by other departments, such as Filocom (which uses several administrative files, including the file of the property taxes) or the survey of the establishments funded by the Ministry of social affairs to accommodate people in social and economic difficulties (the ES-DS survey).

Statistical projects in France, or how to measure housing hardship

In 2010 the French National Council for Statistical Information, or CNIS, has created a sub group on the specific issue of the statistics of "housing hardship". This group has developed a classification of housing situations which is compatible with Ethos light though not similar. Several dimensions are taken into account: physical type of housing, occupancy status, quality of housing, precariousness in terms of length of time one can stay in the dwelling (four dimensions which were already present in a similar work endeavoured at the beginning of the 1990s), the environment of the dwelling (in terms of environmental concerns but also of social segregation), the relationship between the dwelling and the household that inhabits it (such as: a dwelling too small for the size of the household, a dwelling too expensive for the household income, or other issues such as proximity to services and employment – in case the household needs such services as schools, for example) and adaptation of the accommodation to special needs (e.g., handicapped member in the household). An assessment of the various (mostly public) statistical sources concerning housing hardship has been the subject of two previous reports and the group will make recommendations about the improvement of these sources.

One of these recommendations is to reintegrate questions about people living temporarily with the household in the questionnaire of the Housing survey where it was in 1996 and 2002 but not in 2006.

2 The French policy shift in dominating approach on homelessness and long-term homelessness

The 2010 Joint Report, adopted in March by the European Commission and the Council of Ministers, stated Member States should develop "strategies to address housing exclusion and homelessness". The report mentioned a number of important elements for creating effective strategies, including:

- effective governance (involving all relevant stakeholders),
- an evidence basis of thorough information and evaluation (including accurate and consistent data on homelessness),
- clearly formulated targets (such as on the prevention of homelessness, a reduction of its duration, targeting the most severe homelessness, improving the quality of services for homeless people or on increasing the supply of affordable housing),
- integrated policies (combining financial support to individuals, effective regulation and quality social services which are easily accessible for homeless people),
- the role of social and public housing as one of the main solutions for homelessness, and
- the adaptation to new risk groups (including migrant and mobile workers).

Clearly all these goals are now part of the French strategy to fight homelessness.

The French policy shift on Homelessness

During the winter of 2006/2007, the so-called “mouvement des tentes” (“the tent movement”) was set in motion by the association “les Enfants de Don Quichotte” (“Don Quixote’s Children”). Strongly endorsed by the media, public opinion and numerous NGOs, the movement led to the creation of more spots in shelters and better quality of services. Today the total number of available spots is 118 000 beds, of which 40 000 are for asylum seekers. The State now spends over one billion three hundred million Euros for shelters and various social and medical services for homeless and asylum seekers.

But, as Edgar pointed out in his contribution to a recent publication on “A Social Inclusion Roadmap for Europe 2020”, there is now in France, as in many European countries, a shift in the dominant approach to homelessness.

Unlike the approaches generally known as ‘staircase’ or ‘continuum of care’ models, in recent years, increased efforts have been made to use a ‘Housing First’ approach, aimed at providing homeless persons with permanent housing as quickly as possible and providing of additional support services if needed.

An essential element of this approach is that social service interventions are generally more effective when provided to people in their own homes. Choice and a feeling of security and stability regarding housing and support are important elements of this alternative strategy. But variations exist in practice regarding the type and duration of support and the type of long-term housing provided.

In France this strategy shift was officially adopted by the government in 2009 and carried out by the “Secretary of State for Urban affairs and Housing”, now seconded by the “Interministerial Delegate for shelter and access to housing of homeless”.

In reality this strategy shift is the result of a long-term evolution. Since the nineties, more and more shelters have been directly established in the ordinary social or private housing sector. A

recent study stated: "39 % of the accommodation are apartments scattered in the city".¹ The inhabitants of these apartments come under different statuses: some are people without tenant's rights, others sub-let tenants with limited rights who, after a while, are sometimes recognized as real tenants (with what is called a "bail glissant" (a "slipping lease").

Moreover, since the sixties, has been created a large number of "residences sociales" ("social residences"), at first intended for the migrant workers, then for the young workers and finally for people in need. A lot of these "residences" are now being rehabilitated. People who do not have enough revenue to live in ordinary housing live there. These residents live in personal bedrooms or apartments. Officially the stay is only temporary, but in fact people can live there as long as necessary.

In 2009 the Government launched a new programme called "intermediation locative" to accelerate the transfer from temporary shelters to ordinary housing. Since then, the relations have been strengthened between shelter managers and social housing sector leaders. The administration fixes quantitative objectives on shelter-to-housing shift every year.

Since 2007 the right to housing can be enforced by court. But this law ("Droit au logement opposable") has only partially been put into effect.

The French policy toward long-term Homelessness

- In all major cities social mobile squads exist today. These squads travel through the cities day and night reaching out to «those who no longer ask for anything». Furthermore fifty specialized psychiatric squads have been created.
- Since 2002 some «maisons-relais» ou «pensions de famille» (post-houses or family pensions) have been created. These «maisons relais» are intended for the long-term homeless who suffer from solitude and for whom an access to an ordinary lifestyle is not thinkable at short or medium term. These residences gather together 10 to 25 tenants. Each tenant occupies his own apartment. This policy, which already reaches out 10 000 tenants, has encountered real success.
- Certain «résidences accueil» (welcome residences) are a variant on «maisons relais» for people who need specialized psychiatric services.
- This year an experiment has been launched called "Housing First" largely inspired by the American experience « Pathways to Housing ». In four big cities (Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse), some long-term homeless with severe problems (psychiatric pathologies, addictions) will have to access to their own « ordinary » home with adequate social and medical services. The results of this experimentation will be scientifically evaluated.

Today some tools against long-term homelessness exist but we lack serious evaluation of the results on each tool.

Probably long-term supported housing meets the needs of some homeless people. For others, floating support in regular scattered housing seems to be a better alternative.

¹ Direction de la recherche, des études, de l'évaluation et des statistiques (DREES), Thierry Mainaud : « Les établissements accueillant des adultes et des familles en difficulté sociale », n° 738, septembre 2010.