

WELFARE AND STUDIES IN HOUSING

Cavallo, Giulia

Scoping review of academic
research on Housing First in
the Nordic countries

SBV Working Paper Series 25:5

Published

2025

Editor

Martin Grander, martin.grander@mau.se

Publisher

Studier i boende och välfärd

Malmö universitet

205 05 Malmö

ISBN: 978-91-7877-610-8 (print)

978-91-7877-611-5 (pdf)

DOI: 10.24834/isbn.9789178776115

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WORKING PAPER

Scoping review of academic research on Housing First in the Nordic countries

Giulia Cavallo*

2025-06-09

* Research intern, Department of Urban Studies, Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University.
email: giu.cavallo1@gmail.com

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Preface

The Housing First model has reshaped how we think about homelessness, emphasizing immediate access to housing without preconditions. In the Nordic context—where welfare systems are robust yet evolving—this model presents both opportunities and tensions.

This working paper offers a scoping review of academic research on Housing First across the Nordic countries. It reveals a strong focus on practical outcomes, while also surfacing deeper debates about the roots of homelessness and the role of the state. By highlighting these contrasting perspectives, the report invites a broader, more critical conversation about how evidence-based models can address structural inequality. This work is a valuable resource for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand and improve Housing First in a Nordic setting.

The working paper is written by Giulia Cavallo, research intern in Urban Studies at the Department of Urban Studies, Malmö University.

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Malmö, June 9, 2025

Martin Grander

Managing Director, Studies in Housing and Welfare

Abstract

The Housing First model has gained significant academic attention in Europe in recent decades. This scoping review addresses a gap in the literature by analyzing the state of academic research on Housing First in the Nordic countries. Following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-step framework, the study identifies relevant research through database searches (Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest). A total of 29 articles were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach and inductive thematic analysis.

Key findings reveal that research in the Nordic countries is primarily practice-oriented, focusing on the evaluation of outcomes, effectiveness, adaptation to local contexts, and the experiences of users and practitioners. The analysis highlights three key opposing perspectives within the Housing First model: (1) homelessness is seen either as an individual pathology or as a result of systemic marginalization; (2) housing is framed as either a treatment for this pathology or a component of harm reduction; and (3) the State is viewed as either a facilitator of homelessness solutions or a barrier that should be replaced by community-driven initiatives. These opposing perspectives stem from differing views on homelessness, either as a result of structural marginalization or as an individual, pathological issue.

The results of the research suggest that the focus on evidence-based solutions tends to overlook the structural causes of homelessness, leading to contradictions in the model's application and potentially failing to meet the diverse needs of the homeless population. Future research should broaden its scope by including diverse sources, conducting international reviews, and deepening theoretical analysis to better understand how Housing First addresses homelessness's root causes.

Keywords: Housing First, Homelessness, Nordic countries, Academic research, Scoping review

1. Introduction

Housing First is a model grounded in the principle that homeless individuals should be provided with housing and support services regardless of their substance use or mental health challenges, and that these services should be offered based on the individual's own choices. Housing is viewed as a human right that leads to recovery through a harm reduction approach (Tsemberis, 2010). Housing First was conceived as an alternative to the traditional staircase model, which typically required individuals to first demonstrate abstinence from drugs and alcohol and to engage in treatment before being eligible for independent housing (Dyb, 2016; Knutgård & Kristiansen, 2013, 2019; Knutgård, et al. 2021; Pleace, 2016; Tsemberis, 2010). The adoption of Housing First in the Nordic countries began in the early 2000s, driven by the same motivation that led to its creation: to provide an alternative to the mainstream housing staircase model. Nowadays, Denmark, Finland and Sweden have adopted Housing First as part of their national homelessness strategies, while in Norway the model has been adopted by some municipalities or local associations. One key driver in this shift is the evidence of the effectiveness of the Housing First model in enabling people using Housing First to sustain their housing (Knutgård, et al. 2021). The implementation in the Nordic countries involved testing evidence-based support methods used in Housing First programs in the United States by implementing similar interventions within national contexts (Benjaminsen, 2013; Källmén & Blid, 2016; Knutgård & Kristiansen, 2013; Pleace, 2017).

The first country to implement the Housing First model was Finland in 2008, followed by Sweden, Denmark and Norway. In Finland, the 2008 Paavo I program introduced the Housing First approach, resulting in a significant reduction in homelessness. However, it did not effectively address long-term homelessness (Pleace, 2017; Tainio & Fredriksson, 2009). The subsequent Paavo II program (2012-2015) expanded the strategy to include homelessness prevention, hidden homelessness, and service development, with Housing First as part of a broader strategy. While Finland has made progress in reducing visible homelessness, challenges persist with hidden and migrant homelessness (Pleace, 2017).

In Sweden, the expansion of Housing First services can be seen as research-driven, with the University playing a key role in introducing the concept to Swedish municipalities in 2009 (Källmén & Blid, 2016; Knutgård & Kristiansen, 2013). No funds have been allocated to initiate Housing First services and the implementation process has been slow until 2022, when Housing First has been ultimately adopted as the national strategy (Socialstyrelsen, 2024). Since the academic literature on Housing First reviewed predates this implementation, the information and findings presented in this work are based on the experiences of Sweden before the formal adoption of Housing First as a national strategy. In Denmark, the national homelessness strategy from 2009 to 2013 tested Housing First methods to adapt and develop similar interventions within the Danish context (Benjaminsen, 2018). This approach, which involved close collaboration between local municipalities and national policymakers, marked a shift from a "treatment first" model to providing housing solutions, including institutional accommodations and independent scattered housing through public housing access. However, only 4% of the homeless population has been involved within this period and homelessness increased by 33% between 2009 and 2017, largely due to a growing shortage of affordable housing (Benjaminsen, 2017, 2018). A follow-up initiative—The Implementation Project—was launched from 2014 to 2016, aiming to embed Housing First in the municipalities involved in the initial program and expand it to new municipalities (Benjaminsen, 2018).

Norway's first national homelessness strategy, implemented between 2001 and 2004, initially followed the staircase of transition model. However, during this period, the approach shifted towards a housing-led model (Barvik & Flåto, 2018; Dyb, 2016). While Housing First is not part of a national program, several Norwegian municipalities have developed variations of the model in recent years, with support from national agencies like the Housing Bank, the Directorate of Health, and the Directorate of Labor and Welfare (Andvig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Barvik & Flåto, 2018).

The focus on the Nordic countries is particularly relevant and interesting due to their long-standing commitment to social housing policies aimed at pro-

viding decent housing for low-income households (Bengtsson & Ruonavaara, 2010; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013). While the ultimate goal of these policies is similar across the countries, there are significant differences in the institutional arrangements used to achieve this objective, with the Housing First model being one of the approaches explored. Extensive research has been conducted at local, national and international levels, yet a gap remains in the academic literature regarding a comprehensive analysis of the Housing First model in the Nordic context. As of the time of the research, no interdisciplinary literature review on Housing First in the Nordic countries exists.

This scoping study aims to address this gap by mapping the key concepts that underpin the research on Housing First in the Nordic context, identifying gaps in the existing literature, and drawing conclusions about the overall state of research activity in this area. The study will therefore seek to answer the following research question: *what is the current state of academic research on the Housing First model in the Nordic countries?*

2. Positionality Statement

In studying Housing First and homelessness, it is crucial to acknowledge the author's positionality, as background, privileges, and perspectives can shape the interpretation of findings. The author (she/her) identifies as a white European tenant living in Malmö, Sweden, without personal experience of housing precarity or homelessness. The author has been involved in activism engaging in grassroots efforts to address housing precarity in Italy, Europe. Research on homelessness is inherently advocacy-oriented, as it focuses on a pressing social injustice. The study of homelessness is not only about academic interest but also a response to the need for change, as addressing homelessness is tied to fundamental human rights (Kaakinen, 2013). Recognising this positionality allows the reader for a more critical view of the research process and potential biases.

3. Methodology

As of the time of the research, no comprehensive review of the literature on Housing First in the Nordic countries exists. This scoping study aims to address this gap by mapping the key concepts that underpin the research on Housing First in the Nordic context, identifying gaps in the existing literature, and drawing conclusions about the overall state of research activity in this area. The study will therefore seek to answer the following research question: *what is the current state of academic research on the Housing First model in the Nordic countries?*

The research design for this paper is based on the five-stage methodological framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005):

- Stage 1: identifying the research question
- Stage 2: identifying relevant studies
- Stage 3: study selection
- Stage 4: charting the data
- Stage 5: collating, summarising and reporting the results

The research has been based on the articles found through the databases Scopus, Web of Science and ProQuest. The aim was to find all the articles focusing on Housing First in the Nordic Countries. Different country's terminology has been taken into consideration. *Housing First* is used in Norway and Denmark, and the translated version in the national language *Bostad först* for Sweden and *Asunto ensin* for Finland have been included as terms of the research.

Therefore, the research terms used are: "Housing First" OR "Bostad först" OR "Asunto ensin" AND "Nordic Countries" OR Scandinavia OR Scandinavian OR Denmark OR danish OR Sweden OR Swedish OR Norway OR norwegian OR Finland OR finnish. In order to investigate the current state of academic research, only peer reviewed articles have been included in the research. Additionally, references of all the articles found have been analysed and all the articles respecting the criteria have been included in the research (see Appendix 2). Among the articles gathered from the reference lists, three were written in Finnish (Kaakinen, 2013; Kettunen, 2013; Tuomaala, 2018) and have been translated using AI (Chat GPT).

The articles found with this input are in total 88. When typing only *Bostad först* or *Asunto ensin*, there have been no results.

In order to chart the data, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined. The inclusion criteria specify that eligible studies must be available in one of the following languages: English, Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, or Swedish. Studies were excluded if they did not focus on Housing First or were conducted outside the Nordic countries. Studies at the European level that included the participation of a Nordic Country have been also excluded (see Appendix 1 and 3).

Out of the 88 articles identified through databases, 41 duplicates were removed. The remaining articles were screened, and 34 were excluded based on the criteria mentioned earlier. Additionally, the reference lists of the included articles were reviewed, leading to the addition of 12 more articles. In total, 29 articles have been analysed (See Figure 1).

The research utilised a descriptive-analytical method, applying a consistent analytical framework across all studies and gathering standardised information for each (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Additionally, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Keywords

naturally emerged from the data, supporting the identification of initial themes and contributing to a data-driven understanding. The process of theme development involved organising these keywords and their associated coded data into broader thematic categories. The meaning of the identified themes was ultimately interpreted and discussed (Naeem et al., 2023).

3.1 Limitations

Limitations of the research should be considered when interpreting the results. The focus on academic literature limits the research by not including grey literature, such as reports from government agencies, NGOs or field practitioners. Studies on Housing First often aim to assess its implementation and support practitioners and municipalities in effectively applying the model. As a result, much of the research and material on Housing First is practice-oriented and published as reports. While this body of work is relevant and would be beneficial to include in future research, it falls beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, the emphasis on the Nordic countries offers valuable insights into its implementation in similar welfare systems but limits the scope, as Housing First research is also well-developed internationally, with strong cross-country collaboration. Especially in relation to Housing First, there are several Europe-

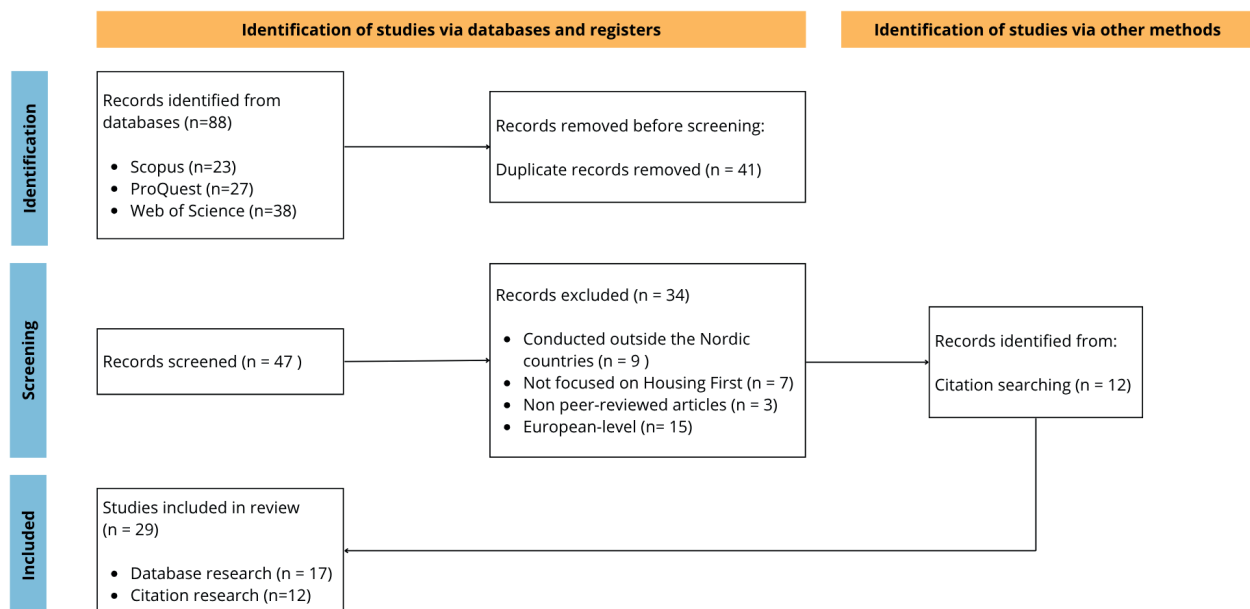


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for updated systematic reviews which included searches of databases, registers and other sources

an organizations¹ that conduct comparative studies and reports on the model across European countries, while also promoting collaboration among policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and civil society. This research is often co-authored by scholars from various countries, including Nordic researchers. Future research at the European level would provide valuable insights. Furthermore, Housing First is closely linked to broader issues such as homelessness, poverty, welfare, and housing, and is mentioned in some studies even when it is not the primary focus. Focusing exclusively on studies centered on Housing First provides insight into its academic relevance and highlights areas where it is given more attention, but it limits a wider understanding of the topic. As a result, the reviewed literature should not be regarded as a complete representation of all the existing knowledge production on Housing First in the Nordic countries.

4. Analysis

4.1 Main characteristics of research on Housing First in the Nordic Countries

The adoption of the Housing First model in the Nordic countries is driven by evidence-based research from the United States. Among the academic literature reviewed, there are no articles published prior to the model's implementation in the Nordic countries. All the reviewed articles were published after the introduction of the model, focusing primarily on assessing its outcomes and effectiveness, as well as exploring its adaptation to local contexts, with a particular emphasis on the personal experiences of both users and service providers (Andvig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Hansen, 2018). Most of the literature is practice-oriented, with only 6 (Carlsson Stylianides, et al., 2022; Knutagård, et al., 2021; Sannino & Engeström, 2018; Sannino, 2018, 2020, 2022) out of the 29 articles being theory-focused. The theoretical literature discussed in this review primarily draws from social work and expansive learning frameworks to examine the processes of co-producing change and transformative learning. Research within social work (Knutagård et al., 2021) focuses on the challenges and opportunities involved in collaborative efforts to drive change. Expansive learning and transfor-

¹ Some examples include, among others, Housing First Europe Hub, FEANTSA, European Observatory of homelessness.

mative agency, explored by Sannino et al. (2018, 2020, 2022), delve into how groups can transcend established practices and create new approaches in response to deepening contradictions and conflicts. Additionally, the concept of utopias is used as a critical tool for imagining and acting beyond the current system, facilitating transformative learning and action (Sannino, 2020). The relatively small volume of academic studies, compared to the extensive reports from NGOs and government agencies, highlights the emphasis on testing the model's effectiveness and improving social work practices in the housing operations.

Most of the research reviewed uses qualitative methods, with studies generally reporting more positive outcomes compared to quantitative studies. Housing First is often portrayed as an unquestionable success (Löfstrand & Juhila, 2017), with participants and staff frequently expressing satisfaction (Andvig et al., 2018; Andvig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Benjaminsen, 2013; (Granfelt & Turunen, 2021; Hansen, 2018; Källmén & Blid, 2016; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013, 2019; Ranta & Juhila, 2020). Participants highlight the importance of agency and freedom of choice in situations like getting access to housing based on their preferences and being able to make decisions without the fear of punishment. The absence of punishment allows the creation of a relationship of trust between users and providers, which makes it possible to ask for help without the fear of losing their tenure and getting support of the staff in different situations of daily life (Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013; Granfelt & Turunen, 2021; Hansen, 2018). By trusting providers, users also develop trust in the broader welfare system, enabling access to healthcare services and preventing further harm (Andvig et al., 2018; Hansen, 2018).

The literature reviewed highlights several key research gaps. One significant area of focus is the limited research on women in the context of homelessness (Granfelt & Turunen, 2021; Pleace, 2017). Definitions that exclude hidden homelessness have contributed to a systematic underestimation of the extent of female homelessness, leading to a neglect of gender-related issues in both policy and service design, as well as in research. Additionally, international collaboration in this field has been relatively limited (Kaakinen, 2013). Another gap identified is the need

for research on learning to be more closely aligned with efforts to support struggles for fundamental human rights and the development of equitable socio-economic conditions (Sannino, 2020).

4.2 Perspectives on Housing First and homelessness

The thematic analysis identified four key themes. Three of these themes—the beneficiaries' agency, the role of housing, and the role of the State—are marked by contradictions identified in the literature. Conversely, adopting a holistic approach leads to unanimous agreement within the literature. All these themes are explored in the following chapter.

Agency of beneficiaries within the service

The target population of most of the research is primarily individuals diagnosed with substance abuse issues, mental health conditions, or a combination of both. This approach leads to the individualization and medicalisation of the homeless population. In a few cases (Benjaminsen, 2013, 2018; Källmén & Blid, 2016; Tuomaala, 2018), studies focus on the duration of homelessness rather than diagnosis, using typologies like those developed by Kuhn and Culhane (1998), which distinguish between transitional, episodic, and chronic homelessness. Only one study (Granfelt & Turunen, 2021) differentiates the target population by gender, focusing specifically on women.

The principles of recovery and freedom of choice are highlighted as drivers of the individualization and medicalization of homeless individuals within the Housing First philosophy (Raitakari et al., 2016; Tuomaala, 2018). According to the principle of recovery, by ensuring stable housing, individuals are expected to reduce alcohol use, improve mental health and therefore integrate into community and normalcy (Tainio & Fredriksson, 2009). The main critique to this approach is that it places excessive responsibility on individuals (Tainio & Fredriksson, 2009; Tuomaala, 2018).

The principle of freedom of choice is seen as crucial for enabling the potential for change (Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2019; Pleace, 2017), which is expected to be the result of the processes of active involvement and collaboration between Housing First users and

providers (Andvig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Sannino, 2018). However, the notion of freedom is highlighted as conditional (Hansen, 2018; Kettunen, 2013; Tuomaala, 2018). While service providers emphasise the importance of users' personal choices and attitudes in maintaining permanency in Housing First, they simultaneously assert that residents cannot succeed without external support, particularly from staff and institutional guidance (Tuomaala, 2018).

The stigma surrounding homelessness often results in mutual prejudice between clients and service providers, manifesting in the belief that individuals experiencing homelessness are unable to conform to societal norms of independent living and acceptable behaviour (Sannino, 2018). On one hand, most participants agree with the view of the staff as supportive partners in decision-making, valuing their guidance while respecting freedom of choice. Staff visits for example, even unrequested, provide a sense of security for many (Hansen, 2018). On the other hand, participants' frustrations suggest that the constraints on their ability to fully exercise their agency stem from limitations imposed by institutional rules and regulations, such as property owners' influence over housing agreements, which can lead to eviction (Löfstrand & Juhila, 2021). In Finland, the lack of housing choice in Housing First programs is evident, with residents assigned large units without alternatives and unable to choose their neighbours. Communal living with strangers who share similar stigmatised issues can create uncomfortable interactions. Additionally, there are no options to personalise units, and challenges like substance use within housing units complicate matters, especially for those trying to remain substance-free (Granfelt & Turunen, 2021; Kettunen, 2013; Tuomaala, 2018). The main challenge for workers in Housing First programs lies in balancing clients' freedom of agency with the need to comply with institutional regulations (Löfstrand & Juhila, 2021).

The Housing First principles of recovery and freedom of choice are based on the idea of user agency as an internal construct empowering individuals to make their own choices and take responsibility for their actions. In contrast, a minority of critical perspectives argue that user agency should be understood as an external construct, emphasizing the need to address the underlying oppressive systems that sustain hom-

lessness, such as the shortage of affordable housing and social isolation (Löfstrand & Juhila, 2017; Sannino, 2018, 2022).

Role of housing

Housing retention rates across Nordic countries are high, ranging from 70% to 90% (Benjaminsen, 2013; Hansen, 2018; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013; Tainio & Fredriksson, 2009). This success suggests that Housing First programs are effective in providing stability for individuals experiencing homelessness, even if there is still uncertainty in research regarding whether housing stability is primarily achieved through housing alone, support services, or a combination of both.

Aligned with research that consistently shows that housing alone does not directly prevent or address mental health issues or substance use (Dyb, 2016; Källmén & Blid, 2016; Kettunen, 2013; Ranta & Juhila, 2020), the Housing First philosophy views housing as a key enabler for individuals with dual diagnoses to begin their recovery and improve their quality of life without requiring complete abstinence (Andvig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Dyb, 2016; Hansen, 2018; Kettunen, 2013; Knutagård, et al., 2021; Tuomaala, 2018). Overall, housing is seen not as the key to success in rehabilitation, but as a tool to facilitate it.

Implementation barriers and role of the State

The main barriers faced within the implementation of Housing First in the Nordic countries include the difficulty of adapting the Housing First model to align with existing national housing systems, conflicts between different state sectors, such as housing and social services, and the stigma present within the welfare system.

Denmark showcases how the integration of Housing First into the national housing system has ultimately made it more difficult for marginalised groups to access housing. Public housing, which was used to provide Housing First accommodation, saw rent increases following renovations, further limiting accessibility for these groups (Benjaminsen, 2013). Regarding conflicts between different state sectors, an ongoing debate centres on whether the housing allocation office should be integrated organizatio-

nally with social and homeless services. The implementation of Housing First in Sweden has revealed tensions between different state sectors (Carlsson Stylianides, et al., 2022). Housing First modus operandi collides with local administrative routines and regulations. Multiple administrative authorities offer integrated services, but providing effective support to individual clients is challenging due to fragmented management across various aspects of their lives, including coordination with psychiatric services and the creation of employment opportunities (Carlsson Stylianides, et al., 2022; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013, 2019). In Finland long-term homelessness is being addressed by building centralised housing units where a single service provider both rents the apartments and offers the services within the same building. However, from the perspective of housing continuity, it is believed to be essential that housing is not interrupted if a client potentially declines the offered services (Kettunen, 2013). When housing and services are separate, gaps in coordination lead to the disadvantage of individuals who cannot access the regular housing market. However, when the sectors are integrated, problems arise if a client declines services, as it becomes crucial to ensure that housing remains uninterrupted. Another significant barrier to implementing Housing First is the stigma present within the welfare system. In Sweden, the moral opposition to drug use, central to its drug policy, shapes how services for homeless individuals are structured (Holeksa, 2022; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013). The criminalization of drug use reinforces the exclusion of drug users from services, with access often determined by judgments of "deservingness." This leads to social marginalisation, as individuals may feel their lifestyles are judged, leaving them feeling unworthy of respect and support (Hansen, 2018; Holeksa, 2022; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013). The Finnish strategy encountered significant prejudice and resistance from local actors and residents in the areas where the housing units were situated, intensifying the difficult balance between residents' autonomy and participation and the institutional constraints of the housing units (Sannino, 2018; Tuomaala, 2018).

The role of the State is seen as highly influential in the success or failure of the implementation of Housing First. For example, Finland's extensive welfare, health and housing systems are considered respon-

sible for preventing already an important number of potential homelessness (Pleace, 2017). In line with the success of the Finnish model, the dominant perspective in research suggests that the successful implementation of Housing First relies on setting ambitious goals and ensuring strong institutional commitment (Benjaminsen, 2013; Carlsson Stylianides et al., 2022; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013; Pleace, 2017). Sweden's decision to implement Housing First nationwide reflects the positive outcomes observed in other countries and the research on the effectiveness of pivotal projects, which likely influenced the government's shift towards this approach. The main shortcomings of Housing First are often attributed to State deficiencies, such as the unaffordable housing stock in Denmark or the Swedish secondary social housing market based on leasing, both of which are criticized for excluding individuals from accessing the regular housing market (Benjaminsen, 2018; Carlsson Stylianides, et al., 2022; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2019).

Conversely, a minor number of studies challenge the notion that Housing First can only be implemented through centralised, strong institutional support advocating instead for a shift towards deinstitutionalisation, participatory governance and co-creation (Juhila, et al., 2021; Sannino, 2018). Housing First principles are interpreted as a critique to institutional features like the discipline and control imposed on residents, aiming for the complete replacement of institutions with community-based services (Juhila, et al., 2021). Innovations are seen as outcomes of bottom-up processes in which collectives break out of existing standard practices (Sannino, 2018).

Overall, the tension between a strong institutional commitment and a decentralised, community-based approach has not been thoroughly explored, likely due to the prevailing tendency towards supporting a central and strong role of the State for a better implementation of Housing First, as revealed in the reviewed literature.

Holistic approach

The reviewed literature, aligned with the Housing First principle of a holistic health and social approach, underscores the need to engage stakeholders at various levels.

Housing and economic stability are regarded as the most critical interventions, serving as the starting point for all other support efforts. Once these basic needs are met, personal and existential challenges like shame, guilt, and loneliness often arise. The focus then shifts to fostering social connections, building relationships with non-homeless individuals, and strengthening bonds with children and families (Hansen, 2018; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013). This step is fundamental, in fact housing might even increase the risk for homelessness if people do not become emotionally attached to the place they live (Granfelt & Turunen, 2021; Ranta & Juhila, 2020). The interactional approaches of workers within the everyday routines and relations in the communities, like taking out the garbage and grocery shopping, can significantly support clients in building a sense of home and fostering attachment to their apartments (Hansen, 2018; Nousiainen, 2021; Ranta & Juhila, 2020). The importance of receiving adequate support in vulnerable situations within a trust-based worker-client relationship was particularly emphasised by women (Granfelt & Turunen, 2021).

The social context that generates stigma can be more problematic than the actual physical, mental, or socio-economic conditions (Sannino, 2018). Social isolation and a lack of community belonging are common experiences among Housing First service users (Raitakari et al., 2016), and these challenges persist even after participants leave the program. While many participants cite stable housing as a primary motivation for joining Housing First and report significant life improvements after securing their own apartments (Hansen, 2018; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013), they also express a desire to eventually transition to fully independent housing (Kettunen, 2009, 2013; Nousiainen, 2021). However, this goal is hindered by neighbourhood stigma, with residents fearing the presence of homeless groups, and property owners preferring to leave apartments vacant rather than renting to them due to concerns about potential damage (Sannino, 2018).

The literature suggests moving beyond the simplistic dichotomy of housing and services, as the potential for effective solutions lies in the cross-sectoral collaborations between these areas, rather than in isolated service delivery. This perspective is reinforced by Finland's success, which is largely attributed to its

integrated, holistic strategy (Andvig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Benjaminsen, 2013; Carlsson Stylianides, et al., 2022; Holeksa, 2022; Kaakinen, 2013; Knutagård, et al., 2021; Pleace, 2017; Sannino, 2018).

5. Discussion

Housing First was developed in the Nordic Countries by implementing the program while conducting research simultaneously. However, the absence of academic publications prior to the implementation of the model suggests that its extensively researched and evidence-based success in the United States and Canada minimized the need for further academic validation, allowing policymakers in the Nordic countries to adopt it. The relatively limited academic literature on Housing First primarily focuses on evaluating its implementation, effectiveness, and efficiency, as well as examining its practices, with little emphasis on theory-driven knowledge. This can be attributed to the fact that the primary target audience has been social workers, practitioners and policymakers. Furthermore, the small number of individuals participating in Housing First programs in the early stages has made it difficult to conduct extensive research. These factors help explain the limited academic literature on Housing First that emerged in this review.

The dominant qualitative research, based on the experiences of homeless individuals and staff, highlights the favorability of Housing First over treatment-first programs, as no treatment-first clients preferred transitional over permanent housing. Both participants and social workers report feeling respected, recognized, and satisfied in their roles (Hansen, 2018; Löfstrand & Juhila, 2021), however, this may suggest a potential bias: many participants report an improved quality of life compared to their previous situation, although they acknowledge that significant challenges remain (Hansen, 2018). This suggests that an emphasis on personal experiences, particularly those shaped by emotional fulfillment, may constrain more objective evaluations of the program's overall effectiveness. Furthermore, the use of qualitative data makes it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions from the research findings, as Housing First projects vary significantly in terms of the client base's issues, ownership of housing stock, service organization, and the number and experi-

se of staff involved (Kaakinen, 2013; Tainio & Fredriksson, 2009; Tuomaala, 2018). On top of that, the research gaps in the field suggest that there is still a need for further development of knowledge in this area. Given the ambivalent outcomes of Housing First implementation, the limited body of research, and its potential biases, Housing First cannot be conclusively regarded as an unequivocal success, despite the strong academic support for the model, particularly when compared to the previous support systems.

The analysis reveals three main viewpoints that are in opposition to one another within the Housing First model. On one hand, (a) homeless individuals are seen as sharing a common pathology that is considered the cause of their homelessness, while on the other, homelessness is understood as a result of systemic marginalisation. (b) Housing is viewed either as a treatment for the homelessness pathology or as part of a harm reduction approach. (c) The state is viewed as a facilitator of the implementation of strategies to tackle homelessness or as a barrier that should be replaced by collective-based deinstitutionalized initiatives. These three oppositions can be traced to a common underlying factor: the premises on which the framing of homelessness as a problem is based. This framing shapes how the needs, goals, solutions, and responsibility are defined, as well as the methods used to address homelessness. Table 1 summarises the findings.

The definition of homelessness as a problem serves as the starting point: depending on whether it is seen as the result of structural marginalisation or as an individual, pathological issue, two distinct approaches are formed.

The most prevailing perspective in the literature is the individual approach, which has assumptions about the nature of homeless people as individuals sharing a pathology that is the cause of their homelessness. Accordingly, the need is to normalise homeless individuals within society, with the State playing a key role in integrating them into societal norms. In this context, Housing First serves as a treatment for homelessness. As a result, the freedom of choice for service users is conditional upon the requirements of the service to achieve its objectives. The systematic approach has assumptions about the nature of hom-

Table 1. Schematized summary of findings.

Individual	PROBLEM	Systematic
Normalising homeless people to society	NEED	Eliminating marginalisation of homeless people within society
Integration of homeless people into society	GOAL	Modification of the dynamics of society based on homeless people needs
Strong central State (Top-down approach)	RESPONSIBILITY	Community-based initiatives (Bottom-up approach)
Housing First as treatment	SOLUTION	Housing First as harm reduction
Conditional agency of homeless people	IMPLEMENTATION	Full agency of homeless people

lessness as the result of structural marginalisation. The need is therefore to eliminate marginalisation of homeless people within society. In this case, Housing First is viewed as a community-based initiative where housing is considered a harm reduction strategy that prioritizes the complete freedom of choice for homeless individuals. The service is tailored to meet the unique needs of these individuals, and any institutional rigidity is seen as an obstacle to the effectiveness of the bottom-up approach.

The discussion will explore the analysed themes through the perspectives of these two approaches and aim to untangle the factors contributing to the contradictions that have emerged.

5.1 Agency of beneficiaries within the service: medicalisation of individuals *vs* systematic approach

Homelessness can be understood from two contrasting perspectives: one that views homeless individuals as sharing a common pathology believed to be the cause of their condition, and another that sees homelessness as the outcome of systematic marginalization. The focus of research on the particular category of homeless population with diagnosed conditions contributes to framing homelessness as an individual pathology rather than a systematic issue. This approach leads to the individualization and medicalisation of the homeless population, which contradicts the core principle of Housing First that housing is a fundamental human right.

Within the principle of recovery, active participation in managing and shaping support plans is a prerequisite for receiving assistance with rehabilitation (And-

vig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Hansen, 2018; Tainio & Fredriksson, 2009; Tuomaala, 2018), which becomes service users own responsibility, reinforcing the idea that their personal involvement is key to their recovery (Kettunen, 2013; Raitakari et al., 2016). This individual approach places responsibility for change on the homeless person and emphasizes the need for the individual to be rehabilitated and integrated into societal norms, without questioning the system that perpetuates structural marginalisation (Raitakari et al., 2016). This pathologizing lens creates a distorted view of homeless individuals as a homogeneous group defined by presumed psychological or behavioral deficiencies (Pleace, 2017), constraining the potential for more nuanced understanding (Sannino, 2022). While the Housing First model aims to prioritize stable housing with a focus on high levels of agency and freedom, it paradoxically restricts residents' freedom of choice and agency, narrowing the scope of interventions to individual rehabilitation (Löfstrand & Juhila, 2021), and neglecting broader social and systematic factors (Löfstrand & Juhila, 2017; Sannino, 2018, 2022).

5.2 Role of housing: housing as treatment *vs* as harm reduction

The role of housing is considered the pillar of the harm reduction approach of the Housing First model, it represents the starting point for the recovery process. However, the underlying ultimate goal of housing within Housing First is to integrate homeless individuals into society, serving as a form of treatment to support their adaptation. This focus on recovery through housing leads to the individual approach to homelessness within the program. However, if the primary goal were to cure hom-

lessness as a pathology, research suggests the potential efficiency of housing combined with a treatment-first approach. In fact, despite criticisms, the treatment-first model is not a total failure; it can be particularly effective for those individuals willing to undergo substance abuse rehabilitation and able to manage shared housing, which provides a sense of control (Källmén & Blid, 2016).

For the model to be fully consistent with harm reduction, it should focus on eliminating the systematic factors contributing to drug and mental health-related harms and to the marginalisation of homeless people within society. Adopting a systematic approach that sees homelessness as a structural issue frames housing as a form of harm reduction designed to address and challenge it. All in all, the role of housing within Housing First projects in Nordic countries is complex and reflects an ongoing tension between viewing housing as a treatment tool versus as a harm-reduction strategy.

5.3 Implementation barriers and role of the State: strong centralised State support vs deinstitutionalized collective-based initiatives

The role of the State is seen either as a facilitator of the implementation of strategies to tackle homelessness or as a barrier that should be replaced by collective-based deinstitutionalized initiatives.

Regarding the adaptation of Housing First within the national housing systems, the very different experiences of countries that adopted Housing First as a national strategy, such as Finland and Denmark, demonstrate that while centralised support can be beneficial, it is insufficient on its own to ensure the successful implementation of Housing First. Likewise, the deinstitutionalized services in Norway and Sweden also prove inadequate for ensuring the effective implementation of Housing First.

Although the best solution has not yet been found, focusing on the major barriers to Housing First implementation reveals a common element that characterises all of them: the main barriers stem from the centralised, hierarchical structure of the state. Sannino (2018) argues that a person-centred model such as Housing First, which requires flexibility, faces challenges in a highly centralized system and underscores the need to explore collaborative, bot-

tom-up solutions that can engage multiple actors and institutions.

Following the individualistic approach, research tries to explore whether the housing allocation office should be integrated with social services or not, generally supporting the view that homeless individuals need both housing and support for a successful long-term transition to stable housing (Benjaminson, 2013, 2018; Källmén & Blid, 2016).

From a systematic perspective, however, it seems more important to examine whether services for homeless individuals address their actual needs or merely the priorities of service providers, critiquing the "one-size-fits-all" top-down approach based on assumptions about the needs of homeless individuals, which may fail to effectively overcome the barriers to stability (Sannino & Engeström, 2018). In Finland, for example, despite its success, it has been found that the approach is not sufficiently equipped to address the needs of an increasingly diverse client population (Sannino, 2020). Based on these considerations, several scholars suggest going in the direction of welfare services changing from delivery to the co-production of services (Carlsson Stylianides, et al., 2022; Hansen, 2018; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013). A continuous and up-to-date training for professionals that address the stigmatization and criminalization of homelessness within the welfare system is essential to influence the way services are designed. Specific studies on methods to continuously improve Housing First implementation recommend digital peer learning among practitioners (Sannino, 2020) and view the collaboration between users and providers as «a learning journey toward the unknown» (Sannino & Engeström, 2018), which can be facilitated through collective, deinstitutionalized initiatives.

5.4 Holistic approach: moving beyond housing and services

While there is a lack of consensus on the definition of homelessness and no universally agreed-upon approach for addressing it, all scholars agree that any solution must move beyond the binary framework of housing and social services, towards a more holistic approach. Although housing is crucial, its effectiveness is influenced by the interaction of various socioeconomic factors, including education level,

employment, engagement in activities, and a sense of community (Andvig & Hummelvoll, 2015; Dyb, 2016; Hansen, 2018).

The holistic approach is not only to be intended horizontally, meaning the involvement of different sectors, but also vertically, meaning the involvement of different actors at different levels of the systematic existing hierarchy. The macro-level restrictive drug policy and its associated stigma lead to a lack of services and exclusionary policies at the meso-level, resulting in internalised stigma and discrimination at the micro-level, which marginalises individuals (Holeksa, 2022). While the systemic marginalisation process is top-down, the emancipation and liberation process of marginalised people is bottom-up. This is why the needs of marginalized individuals should be the starting point upon which services are built. Agency, as an ongoing process, operates across various sectors and hierarchical levels within society, contributing to the bottom-up creation of new knowledge aimed at addressing systemic harms (Sannino, 2018, 2022).

The holistic approach can serve as a crucial starting point for developing solutions to homelessness that do not seek to integrate individuals into the same harmful system that has marginalized them. Instead, it focuses on transforming this system to better meet the needs of homeless individuals and disrupt the cycle of exclusion.

6. Conclusion

The Housing First model represents a significant positive shift from traditional models in how homelessness is conceptualised and how strategies to address it are developed. Despite its success, research from the Nordic countries highlights the model's complexity and challenges. Overall, the focus on evidence-based solutions prevails over reflections on the definition of homelessness as a problem and its underlying assumptions. This leads most authors to agree on the importance of a housing-led solution to homelessness, yet it also reveals contradictions in its implementation. Without fully addressing the root causes of homelessness, solutions fail to meet the diverse needs of the homeless population, or overlook structural factors contributing to homelessness. The review highlights that while the research in the Nordic countries is still in its early stages, there is a

slow shift from primarily evaluating the implementation of the US-based evidence model to a more comprehensive approach that incorporates both theoretical perspectives and practical analysis. Future research would greatly benefit from broadening its scope by including a variety of sources beyond traditional academic literature and exploring the international dimensions of cooperation and knowledge sharing. In addition, it should critically examine the foundational assumptions of the Housing First model and its implementation, providing alternative perspectives through theoretical analysis to better understand how Housing First can address the root causes of homelessness.

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APPENDIX 1: Excluded literature

Database research excluded literature (n = 34)

	Title	Exclusion criteria
1	Benjaminsen, L., Dyb, E., & O'sullivan, E. (2009). The governance of homelessness in liberal and social democratic welfare regimes: National strategies and models of interventions. In <i>European Journal of Homelessness</i> , 3, 23–51.	Non Nordic Countries (EU-level)
2	Benjaminsen, L., (2014). Mindshift and social work methods in large-scale housing first programs in Denmark. In <i>Homeless in Europe</i> , Summer, 12–13.	Non peer reviewed article
3	Benjaminsen, L., & Andrade, S. B. (2015). Testing a typology of homelessness across welfare regimes: An analysis of shelter use in Denmark compared to the US. In <i>Housing Studies</i> , 30(6), 858–876.	Non HF focused
4	Benjaminsen, L. (2017). Housing first: ending homelessness, transforming systems, and changing lives. In <i>Housing Studies</i> , 32(1), 115-116.	Non Nordic Countries + Non peer reviewed article
5	Busch-Geertsema, V., Edgar, W., O'Sullivan, E., & Pleace, N. (2010). Homelessness and homeless policies in Europe: Lessons from research. In <i>European Consensus Conference on Homelessness</i> . Brussels: FEANTSA.	Non Nordic Countries (EU-level) + Non peer reviewed article
6	Busch-Geertsema, V. (2012). The potential of Housing First from a European perspective. In <i>European Journal of Homelessness</i> , 6(2), 209–225.	Non Nordic Countries (EU-level)
7	Busch-Geertsema, V. (2014). Housing First Europe: Results of a European social experimentation project. In <i>European Journal of Homelessness</i> , 8(1), 13–28.	Non Nordic Countries (EU-level)

APPENDIX 2: Citation search

Records identified from citation searching (n=12)

1	Andvig, E., & Hummelvoll, J.K. (2015). From struggling to survive to a life based on values and choices: first-person experiences of participating in a Norwegian housing first project. In <i>Nordic Journal of Social Research</i> , 6, 167-83, doi: 10.1584/njsr.v6i0A.
2	Benjaminsen, L. (2013). Policy review up-date: Results from the Housing First based Danish homelessness strategy. In <i>European Journal of Homelessness</i> , 7(2), 109–131.
3	Kaakinen, J. (2013). Asunto ensin ja sitten. Teoksessa: Paikka asua ja elää? Näkökulmia asunnottomuuteen ja asumispalveluihin [First Housing and Then. In the work: A Place to Live and Live? Perspectives on Homelessness and Housing Services]. In Hyväri, S. & Kainulainen, S. (Eds.), <i>Diakonia-ammattikorkeakoulun: A Tutkimuksia</i> , 39, 15–24.
4	Källmén, H., & Blid M. (2016). Free from homelessness: is “Housing First” the solution? - A comparison with the “Staircase Model”. A feasibility study. In <i>International archives of addiction research and medicine</i> , 2(1).
5	Kettunen, M. (2013). Asunto ensin -malli Yhdysvalloista ja soveltaminen Suomessa [Housing First Model from the United States and its Application in Finland]. In <i>Yhteiskuntapolitiikka</i> , 78(5), 562–570.
6	Knutagård, M., & Kristiansen, A. (2019). Scaling up housing first pilots – Drivers and barriers. In <i>Nordic Journal of Social Research</i> , 10(1), 1–23.
7	Löfstrand, C. H., & Juhila, K. (2017). Housing first as a moral tale and a travelling idea. In B. Andersson, F. Petersson, & A. Skärner (Eds.), <i>Den motspänstiga akademikern</i> [The recalcitrant academic], 15–37, Égalité.
8	Pleace, N. (2017). The Action Plan for Preventing Homelessness in Finland 2016-2019: The Culmination of an Integrated Strategy to End Homelessness?. In <i>European Journal of Homelessness</i> , 11 (2), 95-115.
9	Sannino, A. (2018). Counteracting the stigma of homelessness: The Finnish Housing First strategy as educational work. In <i>Educação</i> , 41 (3), 385–392, doi:10.15448/1981-2582.2018.3
10	Sannino, A., & Engeström, Y. (2018). Valuable innovations out of “nonsense?” Expansive organizational learning and transformative

APPENDIX 3: Literature included in the research

n = 2	Denmark
1	Benaminsen, L. (2013). Policy review up-date: Results from the Housing First based Danish homelessness strategy. In <i>European Journal of Homelessness</i> , 7(2), 109–131.
2	Benaminsen, L. (2018). Housing First in Denmark: An Analysis of the Coverage Rate among Homeless People and Types of Shelter Users. In <i>Social Inclusion</i> , 6(3), 327-336.
n = 4	Norway
1	Andvig, E., & Hummelvoll, J.K. (2015). From struggling to survive to a life based on values and choices: first-person experiences of participating in a Norwegian housing first project. In <i>Nordic Journal of Social Research</i> , 6, 167-83, doi: 10.1584/njsr.v6i0A.
2	Andvig, E. S., et al. (2018). Harm reduction in a Norwegian housing first project: a qualitative study of the treatment providers' practice. In <i>Advances in Dual Diagnosis</i> , 11(1), 4-15.
3	Dyb, E. (2016). Housing First or no housing? Housing and homelessness at the end of alcohol and drug treatment. In <i>The International Journal on Drug Policy</i> , 36, 76-84.
4	Hansen, I. L. S. (2018). Users' choice in providing services to the most vulnerable homeless people. In <i>Social Inclusion</i> , 6(3), 319-326.
n = 8	Sweden
1	Carlsson Stylianides, K., et al. (2022). Implementation structures at work. Exploring implementation and de-implementation attempts regarding Housing First and Individual Placement and Support. In <i>Social Policy and Administration</i> , 56(4), 617-631.
2	Holeksa, J. (2022). Dealing with low access to harm reduction: a qualitative study of the strategies and risk environments of people

