

FINLAND

The country that gave homes first

Finland stopped making homeless people earn a flat step by step. It gave the home first.

WHERE	Helsinki
WHO	Juha Kaakinen and the Finnish planners who built the Housing First programme
WHEN	2008 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

For many years, Finland helped homeless people with a staircase. First you slept in a shelter. Then you moved to a hostel. If you got your life in order, you might earn a flat at the top.

Then people noticed something. Fewer people were homeless overall. But long-term homelessness was not falling. The staircase was not working.

A home first

So the government asked four experts for new ideas. They were a social scientist, a doctor, a politician and a church leader. Their report was called Nimi Ovessa. It means “Your Name on the Door”.

Their idea was simple. Give a person a home first, with no conditions. Help with other problems after. A home is the base that makes everything else easier.

> **We decided that we wanted to end homelessness, rather than manage it.**
>
> JUHA KAAKINEN, QUOTED BY THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

2008	3,500	35%
year the national plan began	new homes built, 2008 to 2015	fall in long-term homelessness, 2008 to 2015

The idea was not new. An American doctor, Sam Tsemberis, had tried it in the 1990s. What was new was doing it for a whole country. It is called Housing First.

A name on the door

Finland closed most night shelters. It turned old hostels into flats. Each person signed a lease and paid rent, with housing benefit if needed. Support workers stayed close by to help.

One tenant, Tatu Ainesmaa, was in his early 30s. He had slept rough. He had stayed on his brother’s sofa. Now he had a flat near Helsinki that was his. “It’s a big miracle,” he told the Guardian.

By 2015, about 3,500 homes were ready. In Helsinki, sleeping on the street has all but ended. Only one night shelter remains.

Finland has not ended homelessness yet. The government aims to do that by 2027. Many people counted as homeless stay with friends or family. But in 2019 and 2020, reports said Finland was the only country in the European Union where homelessness was falling.

How it unfolded

- **1987** A Finnish government plan first names ending homelessness as a goal.
- **2008** The national Housing First programme begins.
- **2015** 3,500 new homes are built. Long-term homelessness is down 35%.
- **2027** The government's target to end homelessness.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

It reverses the usual order. Most systems ask people to fix their lives before they get a home. Finland gave the home first.

It was a whole country's choice, kept up by one government after another, not one person's project.

OUR TAKE

Finland treated a home as the starting point of recovery, not the prize at the end.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Question the staircase

Finland stopped making people earn a home step by step.

Try this: Find one rule at work or home that makes people prove themselves first. Ask whether it helps.

2 Give a stable base first

Tenants got their own lease and door. That made it easier to work on other problems.

Try this: Before asking someone to change, offer one stable thing: a clear plan, a fixed time, a quiet place.

3 Build the real thing

Kaakinen says pilot projects mean little without enough actual homes.

Try this: Before starting a new project, check you have the real resources, not only the idea.

4 Keep going across years

One government after another kept the plan.

Try this: Pick one long goal. Write the first step for each of the next three months.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A door with your name on it is where recovery starts.

Sources

The Guardian
‘It’s a miracle’: Helsinki’s radical solution to homelessness (2019)

The Christian Science Monitor
Finland’s homeless crisis nearly solved. How? By giving homes to all who need. (2018)

RTÉ
How Finland solved its homelessness problem (2020)

CBC
London wants to eradicate homelessness. Here's how Finland is doing it (2023)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on details. The title says Finland "gave homes first"; it does not say Finland ended homelessness. Counts: the Christian Science Monitor (2018) says about 7,000 homeless people, around 5,000 staying temporarily with friends or relatives, down from about 18,000 thirty years earlier; RTÉ (2020) says about 5,500 long-term homeless people, mostly staying with family or friends, and a drop of about 38% in a decade; Kaakinen told CBC (2023) the number was about 3,000 and had halved in ten years. Finland counts people staying with friends as homeless, so the figures are not comparable with countries that do not, and the story gives no total. The 2008 to 2015 fall in long-term homelessness is 1,345 people, or 35% (Christian Science Monitor); the Guardian says more than 35%. The original aim was 1,250 new homes (Christian Science Monitor) or 2,500 (Guardian); both say about 3,500 were built; the story gives neither goal, only the 3,500. Cost: the Guardian gives €250 million for new homes and 300 extra support workers; the Christian Science Monitor gives about $382 million for the 3,500 homes; the story gives no cost. Savings per person: €15,000 a year (Guardian, CBC) or $18,500 (Christian Science Monitor, citing a 2011 study); the story gives none. Rukkila, the Helsinki unit in the Guardian, does not allow drug or alcohol use, while the Christian Science Monitor says it has few rules; the story does not describe it. The quote is from the Christian Science Monitor. Tatu Ainesmaa's age is given by the Guardian as "turns 32 this summer" in 2019; the story says early 30s. The 2027 target is from RTÉ and CBC and has not been reached; later official figures were not checked. "Only country in the EU where homelessness is falling" is the claim in 2019 and 2020 reports and may be out of date. The programme's idea was not new: the Pathways model of Dr Sam Tsemberis in the US (Christian Science Monitor). Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.