



# Homeless in Europe

*Homelessness is growing fast across Europe.  
It's time to commit to permanent housing for everyone.*

*BY Anita Bartholomew*

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**T**HE DILAPIDATED apartment where Laura Docherty, now 45, lived with her three children in Glasgow, Scotland, barely kept out the wind and rain. “The drains had collapsed outside, and the house was covered in mold,” says Laura.

The landlord refused to make repairs. So, in July 2016, local authorities deemed the building uninhabitable.

Bad as it was, though, that apartment had been home. As she cleaned out the family’s belongings, and locked the door behind her, the reality hit her: they were homeless.

Laura had once been an independent business consultant, but violent confrontations with a romantic partner left her with PTSD. Small incidents—a noise, a smell, an innocuous encounter—can trigger debilitating panic attacks. Unable to work, she relies on child support and government assistance, which isn’t enough to cover private market rent.

At first, she wouldn’t ask anyone for help. “I felt ashamed,” she says.

So, Laura and her adult son, Bradley, then 23, spent their first homeless night in their car. Her younger children, Breac and Zara, then 5 and 7, had been visiting with their father for the week. After they returned, with no assistance forthcoming from the government agency where she applied for social housing, Laura put aside her pride and asked friends for a safe space to sleep. For the next 17 months, the family shuffled from one temporary arrangement to another—a spot on the floor in a friend’s one-bedroom home; an unfurnished apartment under renovation with no shower or tub; a short-term flat

that wasn’t much more livable than the uninhabitable one they’d been forced to leave. With each move, they lost a little more sense of security.

As a result, Laura’s PTSD became more pronounced, but, “I had to keep a calm exterior for the children,” she says.

ABOUT 4 MILLION PEOPLE IN Europe experience bouts of homelessness in any given year, says Freek Spinnewijn, director of Fédération Européenne d’Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri (FEANTSA), a support network for organizations in the EU that help the homeless. Not all those 4 million are what you’d expect. They include people who, like Laura and her children, become homeless after life deals them unexpected setbacks from which they can’t easily recover.

Most of us have a familiar image in our minds’ eyes of what homelessness looks like: a single person, usually a middle-aged man, sleeping “rough” or begging on the street. Such people account for most of the chronically homeless, says Spinnewijn. But, the number of impoverished people experiencing short-term homelessness in an ever-more expensive world is growing.

“If you look at the population where we see the biggest increases, it’s not the single men,” says Spinnewijn who points to younger victims, aged 18 to 29, and people like Laura. “We see increased growth in family homelessness.”

It’s mostly this second category of homeless people—casualties of growing inequality—that Professor Nicholas Pleace, director of the Center of Housing Policy at the University of York, UK,



**Laura inside her home. She now works to help others who are homeless.**

PHOTO BY *Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert*

has encountered in his decades studying the problem. “Their chief characteristics are that they’re poor and relatively unlucky,” says Pleace.

Disabled people are particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless, but so are women fleeing domestic violence (often with children in tow), he says, and those who either can’t find work, or don’t earn enough to afford rising rents in major cities. Though the cost of private housing has climbed, wages have not kept up. Workers in nine European Union member states earned less in 2017 than they did in 2010, according to European Trade Union Institute.

Most countries offered more housing assistance before the Great Recession. Government austerity has disproportionately hurt those already in precarious economic circumstances.

Making the situation worse, in many European cities, the available stock of social housing has shrunk, and little new social housing is being built.

“It’s about 17 percent of all housing in a country like England,” says Professor Pleace. “It was close to 30 percent in 1980.”

The results are as predictable as they are shocking. November 2017 in Ireland: 3,333 children experienced homelessness. April 2017 in Sweden: 10,000 to 15,000 children without homes. In 2015 in the Netherlands, 4,000 children were affected.

Because families with children typically get emergency shelter rather than being left to sleep “rough” on the streets, their plight is usually concealed from view. But that doesn’t make it less traumatic.

## **FLAWED POLICIES FAIL TO SOLVE CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS**

In December 2017, Laura Docherty’s bid for social housing resulted, at long last, in a permanent home. Scarred by the experience, but determined to

make a better future for herself and others, Laura now volunteers to help both those still homeless and women who are victims of domestic abuse.

But not everyone can easily integrate back into society, much as they might want to. If more and more families now risk losing their homes, imagine the plight of those who society left behind long ago. People who have been homeless for years, especially those with mental illness and addictions, lack more than just tangible resources. They lack emotional resources, and homelessness can strip them of the few they might have had.

Yet, society typically treats chronically homeless people like stubborn children, limiting support until they prove they can behave. In what's called the "staircase" model, chronically homeless people must show they are "housing ready" by first succeeding at a number of steps, such as abstaining from drugs and alcohol, solving their other behavioral problems, and finding work. Transitional housing, a late step on that staircase, provides temporary stability. But one stumble, and you're back on the street, with nothing but a shelter bed to look forward to, assuming there's one available for the night.

Although there are probably half a million shelter beds throughout Europe, Spinnewijn says there still isn't suitable space for all.

"There might be beds enough, but the beds might not be adapted to the needs of the people that look for help," he says. "There are very, very few shelters that have space for couples, so people might actually choose to be in the street because the shelter beds are not double beds." People with pets might also eschew a shelter bed if their ani-

mals can't come along.

And because most shelters won't allow obviously intoxicated people in, there is often little available other than the street.

But everyone needs a warm place on a cold night. It's not unheard of for the homeless of Europe to die of exposure, even in normally temperate cities like Rome. In Hungary alone, this past winter, about 90 homeless people froze to death when sleeping "rough."

Living on the street is a dehumanizing experience, even on the brightest days. Passersby eye you with contempt. Safe places to rest are few. Possessions are limited to what you carry. And so, you have more intensive need for social and health services than your housed fellow citizen, and more interaction with the legal system—all of which cost society money.

Professor Pleace points to a 2006 article in *The New Yorker* magazine about "Million Dollar Murray," a Las Vegas, Nevada homeless man with alcoholism. "He eventually died on the street. And it worked out that the expenditure [on law enforcement, healthcare, and social services], without really doing anything about his homelessness, had been a million dollars, or close to it. And there are European examples of the same kind of thing."

The costs can't adequately be measured in money, though. People living in unsanitary conditions are more susceptible to illness. Typhus, trench fever, and other diseases that had been mostly eradicated in wealthier countries have reappeared, sickening residents of outdoor encampments on the United States' west coast, and in Marseille, France. Tuberculosis, an illness that can spread in close quarters such as

shelters, is nine times more prevalent among homeless people than the general population.

And there are psychological costs to ourselves, of turning our backs on extreme despair. Over time, it coarsens us, chipping away at our self-image as caring human beings.

## THE ONLY SOLUTION THAT'S WORKED: HOUSING FIRST

Adrift after his divorce, and without steady work, Mika Hannula, now 48, of Helsinki, Finland, became homeless. For five years, he existed in a bleak limbo. During the day, he picked up occasional odd jobs thanks to his carpentry skills. When he couldn't scrape together money for a room, or make use of the couch of a compassionate friend, he slept at a Helsinki homeless shelter. He admits that he drank too much. It was one of his few comforts in life.

One winter evening, when the temperature dropped to a brutal minus 27 degrees, Hannula arrived late at the shelter. All the beds were taken. He had nowhere else to go.

"I went to the public toilet," says Hannula, "put down newspapers, and slept a while there." He made it through the night, but in such frigid conditions, being homeless can easily be a death sentence.

Fortunately, stories like Mika Hannula's are becoming more rare in Finland where, unlike every other country in the EU, chronic homelessness is dropping. Finland, which considers housing a basic right, has made a national commitment to completely end homelessness with a Housing First program called *Name on the Door*, administered through the non-profit Y-Foundation.

HOUSING FIRST MEANS just what it sounds like. If chronically homeless people need housing, you first give them housing. Everything else comes second. Drug and alcohol abstinence isn't a prerequisite. "They can get this flat unconditionally," says Juha Kaakinen, CEO of the Y-Foundation. "They don't have to be 'housing ready.'"

Unlike shelters or transitional housing, a Housing First apartment is a permanent home. And one of the most important aspects of the program is that it doesn't assume that people are homeless because they've done something wrong. "That kind of non-judgmental collaborative approach to providing support is the thing that seems to make it much more effective," says Professor Pleace.

To date, the Y-Foundation has built and renovated apartment buildings in several cities as supported housing, staffed with people who assist with community integration. "The idea is that we take care of these people," says Kaakinen. "If you get problems, you try to solve them without evicting people."

In addition to supported housing, the Y-Foundation owns about 6,000 individual units of housing, scattered around the country, for people who need fewer services.

"We treat former homeless people as everybody else in society in the same situation, to get them included in society," says Kaakinen.

As a result of the *Name on the Door* program, chronic homelessness in Finland has dropped by 35 percent over seven years—a total of 1,200 fewer homeless people. In Norway, which has a similar Housing First program, homelessness has dropped by 36 percent in just four years (2,400 fewer homeless).



Elise with some of her artwork

but wouldn't be practical in places with larger populations. "Last year they built in England less social housing than in Finland," says Kaakinen, "and they have ten times more population there."

He also rejects the complaint that it's too expensive. "By housing just one former homeless person, we save €15,000, minimum, taxpayer's money [per year, for other social and emergency services]," he says. And that's after taking into account the cost of buying and maintaining the housing.

What's been missing elsewhere is the political will to make the investment. But with Finland and Norway's successes with Housing First, measured against failures in countries using the staircase model, that might be changing.

"I think that in Europe, nowadays, it's really this very strong understanding that Housing First could be the game changer," he says. So far, only Finland and Norway have made Housing First national policy, but 14 EU countries have begun pilot programs, and two more are in the planning stages.

## AN INTEGRATED APPROACH WORKS BEST

As a 22-year-old art student in Metz, France, in 2005, Elise Martin considered herself a rebel. She left school, moved into her truck, and later joined a "wagon village" caravan of friends in a years-long Bohemian adventure,

fuelled by heroin. If "normal" people looked down at her and her friends as they caroused in the public square, she didn't care. She didn't want to be normal.

But the nomadic life lost appeal as the years passed. Warmth, electricity, even hygiene, were luxuries only fleetingly available. By 2014, Elise was ready for a change.

She sought help from a Housing First pilot program in Grenoble, France, and was connected to housing and other services by a peer worker who understood where Elise was coming from, because she'd been homeless, too.

At first, Elise says, being alone between the four walls of her new apartment felt uncomfortable and even a little frightening. Eventually, with Housing First support, she adjusted, and also conquered her addiction.

People in Elise's situation typically have difficulty finding housing on their own. They have mental health problems. Most suffer from addictions. They might also have physical diseases or disabilities.

Getting the keys to their own apartments doesn't address all their needs. So there is one support person for every ten tenants, and tenants are empowered, but not coerced, to make better life choices. As a result of this approach, 85 percent of France's Housing First tenants were still housed after two years.

"WE ARE AT THE BEGINNING of the paradigm shift," says Dr. Pascale Estecahandy, National Coordinator of France's Housing First program. "The aim is to give quick access to unconditional housing by providing multidisciplinary and intensive support."

Having proven that Housing First works through pilot programs in four cities, France plans to roll out the program to an additional 16 cities by 2023, with a goal of permanently housing 2,000 chronically homeless people.

And, like Finland, France discovered a surprising side benefit: Housing First isn't so much a cost as it is an investment—one that pays quite well. France pays, on average, €30,000 a year for the services used by each person living on the street. But for a Housing First tenant, the average cost drops by more than half, to €14,000.

More important, people once considered outcasts begin to enjoy the kind of ordinary lives that the rest of us take for granted. They re-connect with estranged family and friends. They visit physicians to attend to lingering health concerns. They get vocational training, employment, or engage in volunteer work.

Having a home doesn't solve everything, says Dr. Estecahandy. "It allows you to be in a secure environment and to regain your privacy and dignity." To live the fullest possible life, a Housing First tenant also needs an income.

Elise Martin, currently age 36, now has a job as a Housing First peer worker. She connects tenants with the services they need. She also focuses on harm reduction, including disease prevention, and distributes sterile equipment to those still using drugs. Because she appreciates what an extreme change it is to live inside after life on the streets, she's uniquely equipped to work with people who struggle with the transition, including two friends from her caravan days who she's helped to get jobs and apartments. And her life is full in other ways: she's studying social work, and again creating artwork.

## WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE UNTIL THERE IS PERMANENT HOUSING FOR ALL

The biggest lesson other countries can learn from Finland is that, if you want to end homelessness, you must buy, build, and renovate homes to add to the housing stock.

“Homelessness is not a law of nature,” says Juha Kaakinen. “Neither will it disappear on its own. It will take relentless commitment and continuous determined action. Otherwise countries will continue to witness an immeasurable loss of both financial and human capital.”

But FEANTA’s Freek Spinnewijn cautions that, even with such a commitment, it will take a decade or longer to build or renovate housing units for all who need them.

And the temptation to take the easy way out is great. Without counting all the costs that made Murray a million dollar man, tucking one more bed into an emergency shelter will always look cheaper than building another permanent flat.

So, what must be done on the road to permanent housing for all?

Like tourniquets tying off bleeding wounds, shelters, though far from cures, can be lifesavers. More and better shelters are essential until enough homes are available so that every chronically homeless person can have his or her “Name on the Door.” New and existing shelters need to accommodate all those who lack safe places to sleep, including couples, people with pets, and people with addiction, mental health, and behavioral problems.

For families and other economically disadvantaged people at risk, homelessness prevention must be part of every government’s strategy. Although 23 of the 28 European Union countries provide some sort of housing support to those who need it, often in the form of allowances, FEANTS reports that rental assistance hasn’t kept up with expenses. When allowances are insufficient to cover all reasonable costs, vulnerable people fall behind on rent payments, suffer evictions, and add to the homeless population.

Perhaps the greatest need, and one that is too often in short supply, is empathy. There but for fortune goes any of us.

“It’s quite easy to forget that this is another human being,” says Pleace. “Yet, if given the right support, and given the same opportunities, the typical homeless person—if there is such a thing—has hopes, aspirations, and wishes that are the same as anyone’s. They want somewhere to live. They want a job. They want a relationship.”

And just like the rest of us, they deserve these opportunities. We owe men, women, and children affected by homelessness the chance for a better future.