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Version: Published Version

Monograph:
PLEACE, NICHOLAS orcid.org/0000-0002-2133-2667 (2025) RESEARCH DIGEST NO.4: PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS:EPOCH Practice. Report. Brussels: FEANTSA

RESEARCH DIGEST NO.4
PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

SEPTEMBER 2025

The research digests are among the EPOCH Practice resources provided to representatives of EU Member States and all stakeholders working to combat homelessness in Europe.

The digests aim to help policymakers and practitioners make use of academic research on homelessness.

In 2025, six digests will be published, covering various themes and disciplinary perspectives.

The fourth digest, dated September 2025, addresses the crucial issue of homelessness prevention.

This digest was written by Professor Nicholas Pleace and designed by the EPOCH Practice team.

INTRODUCTION BY PETER MACKIE

Peter Mackie is a Professor in the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University, where his research and advisory work focus on homelessness prevention. His work has shaped prevention-focused legislation and practices in several countries. He is a founding editor of the International Journal on Homelessness and serves as Chair of Llamau, Wales's leading youth homelessness charity.

I am pleased to introduce this edition of the EPOCH Practice Research Digest on homelessness prevention. The digest offers a useful synthesis of current practice across Europe and highlights key gaps in the evidence base. At a time when structural pressures undermine prevention, and emergency responses consume most resources, it is vital to keep prevention in focus.

The digest promotes a five-stage prevention typology that underscores the importance of universal measures and sheds light on the considerable gaps in upstream efforts. As more member states, municipal authorities, and NGOs develop their strategies to address homelessness, this typology provides a practical tool to reflect critically on progress and to shape future plans.

Drawing on the digest, I want to emphasise two considerations for advancing prevention in Europe. First, while universal prevention is often seen as the domain of national or regional governments, local actors – municipalities, NGOs, and community groups – can also play a crucial role, particularly in poverty reduction and fostering supportive social networks. This is particularly important to acknowledge in contexts where central government action is inadequate.

Second, upstream prevention requires engagement from sectors beyond homelessness services, including public bodies, employers, and private landlords. The homelessness sector must increasingly support these actors to take meaningful prevention actions.

Finally, I echo the digest's conclusion that evidence on prevention remains limited. I am certain that many examples of effective practice exist across Europe but remain largely invisible to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Bridging this knowledge gap is essential. As a good colleague of mine says, 'good practice is a bad traveller' – and EPOCH has a vital role in ensuring this knowledge is shared.

1. PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

- An effective **prevention strategy** should include universal services, designed to stop homelessness across the whole population, upstream services for people at higher risk of homelessness, crisis services for when homelessness looks likely and emergency services for when homelessness is imminent. There are also services designed to stop repeated homelessness.

- **Universal prevention** is designed to address structural causes of homelessness, including insufficient affordable housing, poverty and inequalities around health, income, life chances and wellbeing.

- Upstream prevention includes services for people with multiple and complex needs who may be at **increased risk of homelessness**. They may also include **case management services** for people who are leaving foster care, psychiatric care, hospital or prison and assessed as at being at high risk of homelessness.

- Crisis interventions include **eviction prevention** services, such as financial support, mediation between tenants and landlord and legal help. Services to prevent homelessness due to domestic abuse, which mainly affects women and women with dependent children in Europe, include **sanctuary schemes**.

- Emergency prevention occurs when it is not possible to stop the loss of existing housing and centres on rapid rehousing. **Finland** and **Wales** have strategic level homelessness prevention that includes emergency prevention through rapid rehousing.

- Many European homelessness services are designed to stop people who have been homeless from returning to homelessness. Some of these services **are more effective than others**.

- The effectiveness of preventative services and strategies is **likely to be limited** when affordable housing supply is insufficient, there are high rates of poverty and inequality and public health systems are inadequately funded.

- In some EU Member States, including **Finland**, strategies have been developed that use preventative services as part of an integrated policy response to homelessness. However, many **EU Member States** do not have highly developed preventative services, nor clear national prevention strategies.

- There is some evidence that strategic level use of prevention, especially when part of an **integrated homelessness strategy**, can reduce overall European homelessness. However, there is only **limited evidence** on the effectiveness of different types of preventative service. Attempts to **effectively target prevention**, i.e. to ensure those who need help receive it and people who do not require help are not assisted, have been largely unsuccessful and **may be illogical** if they only focus on individual characteristics. This is because homelessness is often caused by structural factors, by chance events and is **often associated with poverty**.

2. STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO PREVENTION

The **main causes** of homelessness in Europe are **poverty and inequality**, **domestic abuse** and **people with multiple and complex needs** facing heightened risks of homelessness, for example when they leave **prison**, **children's homes or foster care or psychiatric hospitals** or following an **emergency admission to hospital**.

Services for preventing homelessness have existed **for decades**, they include:
- Services designed to stop **eviction**.
- **Discharge planning**, also sometimes known as resettlement or transitional services, for people with multiple and complex needs, who might be at heightened risk of homelessness when they leave hospital, residential care, supported housing services or prison.
- Services designed to stop repeated homelessness, which includes many current **European homelessness services**.

Homelessness prevention strategies have been described as clusters of primary, secondary and tertiary **services and systems**. Primary prevention reduces risk for everyone, secondary focuses on people at particular risk and tertiary provides emergency help when a home has been lost. In North America, **distinctions have been made** between universal (population level) and indicated (targeted on 'at risk' people) services **and between** structural (housing market, inequality) and systems level (mainstream public services) prevention, early intervention for at risk groups, eviction prevention and housing stabilisation (to stop repeated homelessness).

Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Peter Mackie and Jenny Wood produced a clearly specified five stage prevention model that can be used to inform strategic planning in 2021:

1. Universal (population level)
2. Upstream (early targeting of groups at heightened risk)
3. Crisis (homelessness is likely to occur soon)
4. Emergency (immediate risk of homelessness)
5. Repeat (services to stop people returning to homelessness)

This sort of approach creates a **continuum of preventative services** that increases in intensity as the risk of homelessness increases.

Universal prevention needs a good supply of high quality affordable housing, a strong welfare safety net, good access to well-paid employment and strong public health services, including mental health and addiction services. There is some evidence that EU Member States with strong welfare systems and social housing have **less homelessness associated with poverty**, which may mean **less overall homelessness**. The risk of homelessness is also lessened when all public services cooperate within an integrated **strategic approach to homelessness** that includes preventative services.

Upstream prevention exists in three main forms and tends to be mainly aimed at people with multiple and complex needs. The first is designed to stop homelessness long before it occurs, including **services** and systems identifying **children at risk of homelessness in school**. The second centres on working with people with multiple and complex needs, who are at heightened risk because of their situation, to make them better prepared for homelessness. Some services go **into prisons** long before someone's sentence comes to an end, designed to minimise the risk that someone will not be able to find and keep housing on leaving, or work with people **leaving the armed services** on the same basis. The third level is to use specialised case management that covers the process of leaving an institution and stays with someone until any risk of homelessness has been reduced. One example is **Critical Time Intervention (CTI)**, which has been **used in Denmark**, although **Housing First** can also be used in this way.

Crisis prevention, when homelessness is likely to occur within a fairly short space of time, is probably the most widespread form of homelessness prevention at strategic level in Europe. Within this, systems and services designed to **prevent eviction** are probably the most common. A pan-EU **analysis of homelessness strategies** identified a range of services including eviction reporting (i.e. welfare/social protection services are informed to ensure assistance is in place), mediation services (that negotiate between tenants and landlords), legal assistance (to ensure tenant's rights are respected) and financial support (a loan or grant that pays off some or all of any rent arrears).

Domestic abuse is a major cause of homelessness in Europe, especially among **women and women with dependent children**. When women enter refuges, their homelessness may not be reliably recorded, because domestic abuse services are often administratively separate from homelessness systems. **EU-level projects** have identified a need for more coordinated and comprehensive services to prevent homelessness associated with domestic abuse. **Sanctuary schemes** are designed to make a woman's home safe and secure so that the perpetrator has to leave. There is also scope to use **Housing First for Women** in this preventative way to enable women to keep their existing home. There are also **Early warning systems** designed enable housing providers to respond quickly to domestic abuse before a risk of homelessness occurs. Research Digest No.3 looks at **women's experience of homelessness**.

Emergency prevention services are distinct because they centre on various models of rapid rehousing, i.e. they are designed to stop the experience of homelessness when there is no way to stop the loss of an existing home. The **Finnish homelessness strategy** is one of the best examples of a comprehensive approach that integrates prevention and emergency prevention, i.e. when and if attempts to retain existing housing fail, the system reacts by rehousing a person or family as rapidly as possible.Outside the EU, **Wales** is another important example of **adopting a two-tier strategy** that tries to both prevent loss of existing housing ('prevention') and also employs rapid rehousing when needed ('relief' or 'alleviation'). Financial assistance is probably the most widespread form of emergency prevention in Europe, i.e. paying rent in advance, rent deposits and other housing costs to enable someone to move into the private rented sector. Accelerated access to social housing is also sometimes available, but in countries like France, Ireland and the UK, there can be **long waits in emergency/temporary accommodation** because of the high level of **demand for social housing**.

A universal right to housing does not exist among EU Member States, but **Scotland** has created very wide legal duties for local authorities/municipalities when someone is homeless. **It has been argued** that creating the right legal frameworks around a human right to housing, which would legally require governments to rapidly rehouse anyone who is homeless, could play an important strategic role in preventing European homelessness. However, a legally enforceable human right to housing would need to be backed by sufficient resources, e.g. a significant increase in affordable housing supply and ensuring welfare systems covered housing costs for low income people, to work properly.

Many of the homelessness services in Europe are designed to stop repeated homelessness. **Current evidence** is that emergency shelters have little or no effect in stopping repeated homelessness and that 'staircase' or 'housing ready' services, that aim to work with someone so they can secure a home and keep it on leaving the service, are less effective than **Housing First**. Systems for people experiencing homelessness that is primarily or mainly caused by poverty tend to focus on **financial support,** which is either temporary (e.g. deposits for rented housing and time limited help with rental costs) or permanent (welfare systems that pay housing related benefits on an open ended basis). **Social housing,** which generally offers more secure tenancies at a much lower rent than the private rented sector can be used to reduce repeated homelessness among families, a model that has been **subject to decades of statistical monitoring** in the UK.

3. EFFECTIVE PREVENTION

The evidence base for preventative services has been criticised for **many years**. Recent views of prevention focused on **Canada, the UK, the US** and **Ireland** could describe the range of preventative services being used, but also reported limited evidence about which approaches were most effective, a situation that also applies at the **EU level**. Two areas where there is some evidence are the integrated use of social housing in the UK as a **crisis/emergency response** and some **American research** on financial assistance to prevent eviction.

There is also some research suggesting that **integrated, preventative strategic responses to homelessness**, such as in **Finland**, are effective in addressing European homelessness. However, an **EU-level study** of homelessness strategies found that systematic use of prevention was confined to a small number of Member States and that the use of preventative services was uneven.

There are also some challenges in determining whether preventative services are effective. On a case-by-case basis, it is difficult to prove prevention makes a difference, i.e. whether someone who uses a preventative service, who does not become homeless, would still have avoided homelessness without receiving any help. There is some evidence from England in the 2000s that the systematic introduction of preventative services can **reduce overall levels of homelessness** and more recent evidence from the major reorientation of **Welsh homelessness strategy** to prevention also suggesting prevention reduces overall homelessness. Alongside this, there is evidence that some preventative services for specific groups, such as the **HF4Y model** aimed at young people leaving care, can be also be effective.

Most EU Member States and other European countries have largely failed to provide a sufficient supply of affordable, decent and affordable homes over the last thirty years, leading to **widespread experience of housing exclusion and after housing cost poverty**. Alongside this, income and health inequalities have increased across much of Europe, including **within EU Member States** and the **UK**. As **Peter Mackie** argues, policy failures at the universal level of prevention are likely to increase the challenges faced by upstream, crisis and emergency prevention, as well as services designed to prevent repeated homelessness.

In an influential paper published in the USA, **Dennis Culhane and colleagues** argued that a truly preventative strategy would involve addressing the huge under supply of affordable housing, deep inequality and high poverty in American society, alongside much more effective policy responses to social problems like addiction. This does not mean that systematic use of prevention cannot help reduce homelessness, as has been evidenced in Finland and the UK, but for a preventative approach to end homelessness in Europe, universal level changes are needed.

American research has tended to focus on targeting preventative services which are upstream or crisis interventions. Part of the logic here is that resources are limited and that it is **'inefficient' for these services** to work with anyone who can avoid homelessness without any outside help. However, as has been argued by **Cameron Parsell and colleagues**, that homelessness prevention is not the same as a public health programme to reduce disease and risks **individualising homelessness**, which has many causes, including structural factors and random trigger events, such as domestic abuse and eviction, as well as someone's needs, characteristics, choices and experiences. There is evidence that most people with multiple and complex needs **do not become homeless** and that **poverty** may be the biggest cause of homelessness in many EU Member States. This has not stopped American attempts to predict homelessness based on individual characteristics, including the **use of AI** and **Machine-Learning** driven approaches, although the best 'predictor' of future homelessness found as yet is **previous experience of homelessness**.

Finland and Wales have adopted an alternative approach, in which the position rather than the characteristics of an individual or family is used to target preventative services. In **Wales**, upstream services which are activated when someone is at risk of homelessness within **56 days** and crisis services when someone is at imminent risk of homelessness. When similar systems were **introduced in England**, a key part of the argument was that these services were likely to **increase overall cost effectiveness** of the homelessness system, by reducing use of emergency accommodation and the costs to public health and criminal justice of sustained and repeated homelessness among people with multiple and complex needs, even if some individuals and families received assistance they might not need.

There have been criticisms of preventative services that were described as too narrowly focused in **Australia**, and barriers to prevention linked to insufficient resources and cultural attitudes to people experiencing **homelessness in Wales**.

A longstanding criticism of preventative services expressed by **Hal Pawson** centres on the risk that preventative services are 'gatekeepers', i.e. they may deflect people from – more expensive - assistance which might provide a more lasting solution to their risks of homelessness. This links to wider criticism that preventative services are a **'sticking plaster' response** that **fails to fully address** a lack of affordable housing supply, limitations of welfare systems, failures in public health and the poverty and deep inequality, in many developed economies, which are associated with homelessness. However, this must be balanced against evidence from countries like Wales and Finland, which indicates that strategic use of prevention can make a **real difference in reducing homelessness**, particularly when part of an integrated, preventative homelessness strategy.

4. BEYOND ACADEMIA

Street Spirit – Anti-Eviction Art Kit: Using Art to Fight Evictions, USA.

Street Spirit is a grassroots US newspaper sold by homeless people, dedicated to social justice and housing rights. In March 2021, it launched the Anti-Eviction Art Kit, a set of six large-format posters with slogans like "Cancel Rent" and "Housing is a Human Right".

The posters can be freely downloaded and printed, allowing communities everywhere to raise awareness about housing rights. The kit has inspired street installations, community exhibitions, and creative campaigns, showing how art can transform public spaces into platforms for social justice.

This edition of Street Spirit, co-edited by Alastair Boone and David Solnit, uses posters, songs, and poems as tools of resistance, embodying Brecht's idea that "Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it".

🔗 Download the kit