

CASE STUDY

CHILE

The Housing First Programme

Summary

People in Chile who are experiencing long-term homelessness often have high rates of drug and alcohol use. As current drug laws criminalise the possession and use of drugs, people in street situations are at high risk of being arrested and incarcerated. The financial toll of this on the country is estimated at USD 7,558,545 between 2005 and 2018.

In 2000, psychologists and social workers studied treatment outcomes from abstinence-based rehabilitation programmes among people experiencing homelessness. They found this punishment-based and zero-tolerance model had high dropout rates and little impact, especially in relation to improving mental health and supporting social reintegration.

These findings led to the innovative Housing First programme. Here, housing is made available to people experiencing homelessness as a first step, accompanied by professional support and access to health services. The support provided is based on people's individual needs, respecting self-determination and autonomy. The Housing First programme has housed hundreds of people in Chile and made a significant difference to people's lives, as reflected by the Chilean Ministry of Finance's positive assessment of the programme and its increased financial support. Housing First has high retention, with 95% of participants staying in the programme for at least three consecutive months and 77% for six months. A survey of participants found 80% reported improvements in social integration and 96% reported improvements in one or more dimensions of their health. This programme is a clear example of the gains that can be made by shifting from punitive approaches to drug use to focus on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Key statistics

\$7.5M

Between 2005 and 2018, 17,301 people experiencing homelessness were incarcerated, at an estimated cost of USD 7,558,545.

>30%

Over 30% of people experiencing homelessness use two or more different drug types, with nearly 25% of them using 'pasta base' (a crude extract of coca leaf).

▲ 142%

Between 2022 and 2024, the budget allocated to Chile's Housing First initiative increased by 142%, partly due to its positive results.

96%

Over 96% of the people participating in Housing First reported improvements in one or more dimension of their overall health.

The punitive approach

Homelessness is often related to processes of social exclusion and vulnerability. In Chile, a 2024 estimate from the Ministry of Social Development indicated that 21,000 people were experiencing homelessness.¹ Of these, approximately 6,000 had been homeless for at least five years.² Records showed that 68% of people who had been homeless for five years used alcohol, 30% used marijuana and 31% used 'pasta base'.³ As current drug laws criminalise the possession and use of drugs, people experiencing long-term homelessness are at high risk of being arrested and incarcerated. The financial toll of this approach is huge; the Chilean Ministry of Economy estimated the cost of incarcerating people experiencing homelessness between 2005 and 2008 was USD 7,558,545.⁴

Challenging the punitive approach

In 2000, psychologists and social workers studied treatment outcomes from residential and outpatient abstinence-based rehabilitation programmes among people experiencing homelessness who were living in low-income neighbourhoods.⁵ They found this punishment-based and zero-tolerance model had high dropout rates and low overall success in terms of outcomes, especially in relation to improving people's mental health and supporting their social reintegration. The findings prompted health and social workers to campaign for a paradigm shift in how drug use, crime and homelessness were approached. They began advocating for a 'housing first' model, in which housing is made available as a first step, and from there, with the necessary professional support and access to health services, homelessness and the risks associated with it can be addressed. The support provided is based on people's individual needs, characteristics, opinions and experiences, respecting each person's self-determination and autonomy.

Instigating change

In 2018, a Housing First (Vivienda Primero) pilot programme was successfully implemented in Santiago and Concepción by two NGOs: Hogar de Cristo (one of the largest NGOs in Chile) and CATIM Corporation. In total, 30 people took part in the pilot. It had positive results, such as an increase in self-esteem and personal development among participants.⁶ A positive evaluation by the Ministry of Finance resulted in funding for the programme.⁷ Since 2021, the Social Development and Family Ministry and the Housing Ministry has been co-funding the Housing First programme. Primarily designed to provide social support for people experiencing homelessness, the programme has had a wider positive impact on public health and people's access to drug treatment and support services.

Unlike other programmes, there are no requirements for entry. This means people do not need to abstain from drug use or participate in other programmes to benefit. Instead, health professionals work from a harm reduction perspective, without violating participants' rights and freedoms.⁸

“Primarily designed to provide social support for people experiencing homelessness, the programme has had a wider positive impact on public health and people's access to drug treatment and support services.”

Investing in community, health and justice.

In 2022, the government allocated CLP⁹ 2,681,619,000 (USD 2.8 million) to the Housing First programme. Positive results led to a 142% budget increase for 2024 to CLP 6,520,585,000 (USD 6.8 million).¹⁰

The programme provides people experiencing long-term homelessness with housing and access to health and social integration services. Participants are supported with stable housing, interventions to improve physical and mental health, the organisation of daily routines, assistance with job seeking, tailored physical and mental health support and social integration (reconnection with family and communities).

Impact

The Housing First programme has housed over 600 people and made a significant difference to people's lives, as reflected in the Budget Department of the Chilean Ministry of Finance's positive assessment of the programme. Housing First has high retention, with 95% of participants staying in the programme for at least three consecutive months and 77% for six months. Moreover, 79% of participants reported improvements in social integration and 96% reported improvements in at least one of the eight dimensions of general health in the assessed year.¹¹ In many cases, improvements in participants' material living conditions has been accompanied by other positive outcomes, such as reconnecting with family, developing occupational activities and accessing health treatments.¹²

The amount approved for the programme in the 2025 budget is CLP 6,794,450,000 (approximately USD 7.1 million).¹³ This is an increase of 4.2% compared to 2024. Increased funding for the programme reflects the recognition of the positive contribution it is making to individual lives, communities and public health.

Sources

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- 2 Ministry of Finance, (2022), Ex Ante evaluation for the budget formulation process, Government of Chile, Santiago. Available from www.dipres.gob.cl/597/articles-244236_doc_pdf.pdf.
- 3 A crude extract of the coca leaf, which contains around 40% to 90% cocaine freebase, along with companion coca alkaloids which act as stimulants, and varying quantities of benzoic acid, methanol and kerosene.
- 4 Ministry for the Economy, Development, and Tourism, (2019) Feasibility study for the implementation of a Social Impact Contract to overcome homelessness, Government of Chile, Santiago. Available from www.economia.gob.cl/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Informe-de-Factibilidad-CIS-Situaci%C3%B3n-Calle.pdf.
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- 6 Ministry of Social Development and Family, (2019), Housing First Program for homeless people, Government of Chile, Santiago. Available from www.adelante-i.eu/sites/default/files/MinisterioDeDesarrolloSocialyFamilia-Chile-Vivienda-Primero.pdf.
- 7 Ministry of Finance, (2022), Ex Ante evaluation for the budget formulation process, Government of Chile, Santiago. Available from www.dipres.gob.cl/597/articles-244236_doc_pdf.pdf.
- 8 Ministry of Social Development and Family, (2022), Exempt Resolution N°0594, Government of Chile, Santiago. Available from www.desarrollosocialyfamilia.gob.cl/storage/docs/0594_aprueba_manual_prientaciones_tecnicas_programa_vivienda_primero_E59586.pdf.
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- 12 Eissmann, I. and Lacalle, I., (2022), Assessment of the Housing First Model, Nuestra Casa, Santiago. Available from www.nochedigna.cl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Informe-de-resultados-Vivienda-Primero-2022.pdf.
- 13 Ministry of Finance, (2024), 2025 Budget Bill, Government of Chile, Santiago. Available from www.senado.cl/ley-de-presupuestos.

This is one in a series of case studies which captures the experiences of governments and donors around the world divesting from punitive approaches to drugs, and investing in programmes which prioritise community, health and justice. These case studies are not meant to be comprehensive but provide examples of effective divestment and investment, and related advocacy strategies.

**DIVEST FROM
THE UNJUST
DRUG WAR.**



**INVEST IN
JUSTICE.**