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# Counting Homelessness and Politics: The Case of Norway

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➤ **Abstract\_** *The Norwegian Government has commissioned six homeless censuses since 1996. The most recent census was conducted in 2016. During the first decade the censuses were irregular, however since 2008 a national homeless census every fourth year is more or less the established rule. The censuses offer time series data on the extent and profile of the homeless population on a national scale over the period of 20 years. The first census, in 1996, prompted the very first national homeless initiative, succeeded by other national homeless initiatives. From the first to the second homeless census in 2003 levels of homelessness dropped, but after that the figures rose slightly but steadily until 2008 and remained stable until 2012. The most recent census in 2016 showed a considerable drop in the number of homeless persons. This article argues that there exists a close linkage between the census results and the governmental initiatives to prevent and counteract homelessness. The decrease can be explained by long-term efforts to alleviate homelessness. However, the institutional embeddedness in the housing policy area is just as important as the outline of the strategies and programs.*

➤ **Key words\_** *homeless policy, measuring homelessness in Norway, homeless census, housing policy*

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<sup>1</sup> The author has been involved in five of the six surveys and was project manager of the latest three (2008, 2012 and 2016).

## Introduction

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Comparing homelessness data between states and regions is a challenging task. The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS)<sup>2</sup> has challenged and tried to bridge both the theoretical and operational gap between the diverging concepts of homelessness throughout Europe. ETHOS has not yet resulted in directly comparable figures across European countries, but ETHOS has brought about knowledge of how homelessness is defined and measured in a European context (Edgar *et al.*, 2004). There is still little consensus about who should be counted as homeless outside of the groups of visible rough sleepers (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

Despite the lack of agreement on the concept and comparable operational definitions, there is little doubt that the Nordic countries belong to the lower end of the scale measuring the homeless population. Three Nordic countries, Denmark, Norway and Sweden use almost the same definitions (the differences are few and minimal) and methods for measuring homelessness. Up to a certain point in time, the figures in all three countries have continued to rise. Denmark are still experiencing an increase in the homeless population (Benjaminsen, 2017), while publication of the results from the last Swedish census is expected at the end of 2017. Up until 2011, the homeless figures in Sweden had grown. Unlike Denmark, the homeless figures in Norway flattened out between 2008 and 2012, before a considerable drop in the number of homeless individuals from 2012 to 2016. The stagnation displayed by the 2012 figures succeeded a decade of steady rise in the homeless population (Dyb and Lid, 2017).

Politically, the Nordic countries have to some extent shaped and implemented similar homeless strategies and programs to prevent and alleviate homelessness (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2008). Similarities in approaches and measures are also found between the Nordic countries, the countries in UK and Ireland (Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2009). With the exception of Finland, no other country in Europe has experienced a decrease in the number of homeless people during the last decade.

The aim of this paper is to analyze and assess features of Norwegian institutions and homeless policies that may explain the decrease in homelessness, which actually started around 2012 and became evident in 2016. The next part of the article offers an explanation and discussion of the homeless survey; the definition of homelessness and the methods of the homeless survey and an assessment of the validity and reliability of the study conducted in 2016. The final part analyses

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<sup>2</sup> ETHOS was developed by the European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH).

homeless initiatives during the last two decades and concludes with an analysis of the connections between the national initiatives, institutional embeddedness of the policy and the (political) role of the homeless censuses.

## Measuring Homelessness

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With the sixth and most recent census carried out in 2016, comparable measurement of homelessness in Norway covers a time series of 20 years. The very first national homeless census conducted in 1996 employed the definition of homelessness and the method used in Sweden in 1993. This definition of homelessness is based on positions in the housing market or rather positions outside the market and in short reads as following: A person is considered homeless if he/she has no privately owned or rented accommodation and is in one of these situations: Reliant on occasional or temporary lodging, lives temporarily with friends, acquaintances or relatives, lives in an institution or in a correctional facility and is due to be discharged or released within two months without access to accommodation, or sleeps rough/has no place to sleep. Persons who live permanently with next of kin or in sublet accommodation are not considered homeless. The situations listed above are further operationalized and exemplified in the survey. Compared to many European countries, in particular those recognising only rough sleeping and persons staying in facilities for homeless people, this represents a wide definition. The largest group of homeless individuals found in all homeless surveys are those staying temporarily with friends, acquaintances or relatives, also including “sofa surfers”. The survey does not necessarily catch all households and persons that are doubling up due to lack of a dwelling of ones own. In order to be registered as homeless, the household must present the housing issue for a welfare authority. The study is cross sectional showing the number and profile of the homeless population in a time window of one week (usually week 48).

Information about the homeless population is gathered through an individual questionnaire. The questionnaires, one for each homeless person, are answered by a wide range of services in contact with homeless people. The main respondent group is the municipal social services<sup>3</sup> supplemented with other services in larger municipalities. Others groups of respondents cover departments in health institutions, prisons, NGOs and other private agencies that provide services for homeless people. The respondent choses whether to answer the questionnaire together with the homeless person or not. Most respondents chose not to contact the homeless person. For quite a few respondents this is not a real choice, because a substantial number of the homeless clients, patients or service users are not in contact with

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<sup>3</sup> Social Services in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV).

the service during the specific week. By Norwegian legislation, every individual possesses information about him-/herself given to an authority, and both for research and other purposes consent should be obtained from the data owner before they are handed out to a third party. Conducting the homeless surveys under these conditions is hardly possible, because the group is hard to reach and, additionally, if only those individuals that agreed to share information were counted, the surveys would suffer from serious shortages. Five state bodies, representing the professional fields among the respondents, and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data has granted exception from client confidentiality, which is essential for carrying through the survey.

### ***Validity and reliability***

Validity of the survey, whether the survey measures the extent (number) and profile of the homeless population in the actual time window, depends largely on three steps of the research project. The first step consists of mapping and collecting the respondent group. The list of respondents from the previous census is useful as a starting point, but extensive revisions have always been essential. The list of respondents refers to the agencies that constitute the respondent group. Some major public welfare reforms during the 20 years of homeless surveys have changed the organization of the municipal health and welfare service as well as altered the institutional systems on state level. Responsibility for services has also shifted between administrative levels. Securing validity on the first step involves identifying the services that are in contact with and/or have knowledge of homeless persons.

The second step concerns the response rate. The response rate varies by the groups of respondents and by size of the municipality. The municipal social services are responsible for providing temporary accommodation and have a duty to assist with finding a permanent dwelling for those who need assistance<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the social services represent the last security net of the welfare state, on which a substantial proportion of the homeless individuals depend, and are often the gate keeper to other services. Securing a high response rate from the social services, minimum 80%, is emphasized by the research team. Other respondent groups, although reporting fewer homeless individuals, register homeless individuals not captured by the social services. The response rate among these groups varies between 30 and 60%. The response rate among municipalities falls proportionate with the population size of the municipality: The largest municipalities are far better covered than the smaller (by end of 2016, Norway had 428 municipalities ranging from 600 000 to 200 population). The research team also prioritize reminders and

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<sup>4</sup> The Social Service Act in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV).

direct contact with the larger municipalities during the registration. The number of homeless individuals is weighted to compensate for fallouts in municipalities with less than 40 000 population.

A third consideration deals with whether the respondents that answer the survey report all individuals known to be homeless during the time window of one week. The researchers deal with the issue by comparing the number of homeless individuals against the numbers from the previous survey. As mentioned, the larger municipalities are contacted, and in case of a sharp drop or other reasons to question the result, the issue is discussed. Follow up on smaller municipalities is prioritized as far as there is the capacity within the project.

Are all the individuals experiencing homelessness in the time window of the survey captured? Most likely not. The issue concerning the validity of the survey is, however, whether the proportion of “dark figures” varies between the six surveys. The response rate and fall-outs shows minimal variation between the surveys. In the last survey (2016), the decrease in homelessness is most substantial in some of the municipalities with the highest response rate. Larger municipalities have more than one and some have many respondents, some with a coordinated effort and one person in charge. Some of the municipalities with a considerable decrease in homelessness were previously among those with a relatively (to the population) high rate, and which have worked on homelessness in a long-term perspective.

The reliability of the survey depends on its ability to produce the same results if repeating the survey under exact similar conditions. In reality, the conditions varies and are influenced by public reforms and other structural causes out of control of the authorities. An example of the latter is a specific impact of the financial crisis on the housing market in 2007 and 2008. Although Norway escaped the severe negative impact on the long run, the crisis caused a certain insecurity in the housing market and a delay among the cohorts that normally should move from the rental to the owner market. The inflow to the rental market continued “as normal”, causing pressure, increased prices and fewer vacant dwellings. This chain of events had negative consequences for vulnerable households.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The issue is discussed in the evaluation of the homeless strategy, *The Pathway to a Permanent Home 2005-2007* (Dyb et al., 2008).

## The Reduction of Homelessness in 2016

The homeless survey is expected to be systematic biased, because the most important and known error-source is dark figures; homeless individuals not captured by the survey. The comprehensive respondent group results in a certain amount of double counts, which are identified and taken out. Double counts are indirectly identified. Due to strict personal data protection legislation in Norway, personal identification is restricted to the individual's initials (first name and surname), the date of birth (not the month) and the year of birth. Matching cases are controlled for gender, home municipality and eventually other characteristics before decision about deleting cases. An essential issue is whether or to which extent the decrease noted in 2016 reflects a real decrease in homelessness or is better explained by biases of the survey. The sharp drop in the number of homeless people in 2016 led to a careful scrutinizing of the method, the implementation of the survey and the collected data. One major change, not in the method, but in the organizing of the project in 2016, is the inclusion of all municipalities. In the five previous surveys a representative selection of municipalities below 40 000 population was included.<sup>6</sup> The fall outs among respondents are higher in smaller municipalities. However, the smaller municipalities, although high in number, report a very limited proportion of the homeless population.

**Table 1. Number of homeless persons (No.) and homeless per 1000 inhabitants (1000 pop.) in four groups of municipalities and the total, all censuses.**

Municip. by pop.	2016 No.	2012 No.	2008 No.	2005 No.	2003 No.	1996 No. <sup>7</sup>	2016 1000 pop.	2012 1000 pop.	2008 1000 pop.	2005 1000 pop.	2003 1000 pop.	1996 1000 pop.
4 cities	1691	2637	2632	2419	2604	3843	1.35	2.23	2.36	2.42	2.56	4.01
>40000	878	1415	1164	973	1101		0.84	1.43	1.35	1.17	1.35	1.53
10-39999	849	1737	1724	1610	1193		0.48	1.06	1.07	1.06	0.78	0.63
<10000	374	470	570	395	336		0.32	0.40	0.48	0.32	0.27	0.36
Total <sup>8</sup>	3909	6259	6091	5496	5200	6200	0.75	1.26	1.27	1.19	1.14	1.50

The explanation for the reduction from over 6000 to below 4000 homeless persons in four years, from 2012 to 2016, had to be sought among the larger municipalities. Table 1 shows the distribution of the number of homeless and homeless individuals

<sup>6</sup> The respondent group included 25% of municipalities 10000-39999 and 20% of municipalities <10000. The results were weighted proportionally. Additionally, a careful weighting compensated for fall outs. This latter form of weighting is also applied in 2016.

<sup>7</sup> The numbers for groups of municipalities except for the four largest cities are not available for 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Due to weighting of the numbers within groups of municipalities, the total is slightly different from the sum of the numbers for each year. For 2016, a group of 117 individuals without registered home municipality is left out of the table.

per 1 000 population among four groups of municipalities. The level of homelessness relative to the size is reflected in the number homeless persons per 1 000 population. 43% of the homeless population are citizens of the four largest cities. 23% are residents in a group of the second largest towns (17 municipalities with >40 000 population). The remaining third of the homeless population is spread among 407 municipalities ranging from 39 999 to 200 population. Underreporting is likely to be highest in the smallest municipalities (<5 000 population), due to both a relative high fall out rate among the respondents and underreporting among those who did respond. A certain number of homeless citizens of the small municipalities, who are not registered by their home municipality, are reported from prisons, institutions and larger municipalities. Small municipalities seem less aware of the existence of homelessness locally and are less likely to participate in the homeless survey.

Inquiries in the cities and large towns with substantial reductions in homelessness clearly indicates that there has been a reduction and even a sharp drop in some municipalities who have a high level of homelessness both in 2012 and earlier, and who have faced considerable housing and/or social problems for a long period. These municipalities explain the reduction with long-term and continuous efforts and anchoring on political and high administrative level. Except for a couple of large municipalities situated in the heart of the oil industry, no other structural explanations for the drop have been identified. Downturn in the oil industry, particularly hitting the South Western part of Norway, led to job losses and first of all, temporary employed people left the area, leaving vacancies in a high priced rental market. The rental market opened up for those considered less attractive tenants and, not least, after a long period of rent rises the rents started on a downturn in 2014/2015 (Statistics Norway).<sup>9</sup> However, in this region as well as in other parts of the country the reduction in homelessness is primarily considered the result of long-term investment in social housing policy and development of competence to meet the needs of homeless individuals.

## Profile of the “New” Homeless Population

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The very first national homeless census in Norway conducted in 1996 highlighted a “new” social problem (Ulfrstad, 1997). Or rather, the census rephrased and re-conceptualized a prominent social issue. The “new” homeless population consisted largely of persons involved in the open drug scene in the cities and individuals, known as the local rough sleepers of heavy drinkers or users of illegal

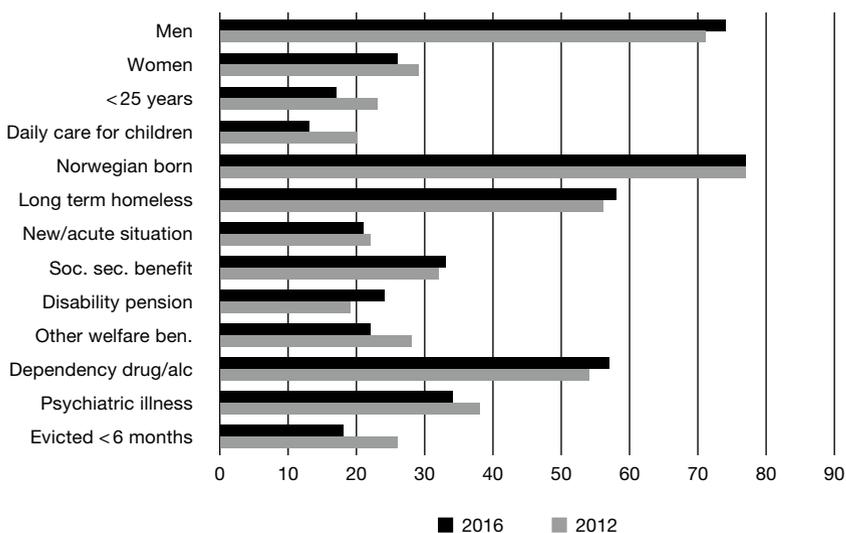
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<sup>9</sup> The general description of the method of the surveys is published in a report from each survey. The particular considerations regarding the 2016 survey is accounted for and discussed in the latest report (Dyb and Lid, 2017).

substances. However, the census showed that the number of individuals was higher and the homeless population was somewhat less homogenous than anticipated. After two decades of national homeless surveys in the Nordic countries (with a certain variation between the countries), it is evident that the majority of the homeless population is characterized by complex problems often connected to abuse, mental illness and other severe health problems. A comparative European study explains the composition of the homeless population in the Nordic countries with the tight security net and relatively generous public welfare spending. The groups likely to fall through the security net is smaller and more problem ridden compared to most other European countries (Stephens *et al.*, 2010).

In addition, to produce a number of the population in the whole country (also decomposed on each municipality), the surveys collect information about demographic features, income sources, where the person stays, the length of the stay and the duration of the homeless period. Additionally a block of questions collect information about social, health and housing problems and assistance and treatment. Although the questionnaire is limited, the data enable profiling the population and subgroups of homeless individuals, which is useful in shaping homeless policy on national and local levels. Figure 1 shows a selection of demographic features and other distinctive features comparing 2016 and 2012.

**Figure 1. Profile of the homeless population in Norway, 2016 and 2012 (%)**



Despite a strong decrease in the number of homeless person from 2012 to 2016, the profile of the population is on the whole stable. Firstly, a comment on the similarities between the two points in time: Three out of four are men, the vast majority are Norwegian born, around 55% are long term homeless (reoccurring situation over several years and/or >6 months) and one in five experience homelessness as an acute and new problem (there is a high share of 'unknown'). The most common income source is social security benefit, which is the bottom of the income security net, followed by disability pension and, third, other welfare benefits. From 2012 to 2016, there is a certain shift in the percentage receiving the three types of financial welfare support. A higher share receive disability pension in 2016 and the share on other welfare benefits has decreased during this time. Around 55% are dependent on drugs and/or alcohol and more than one in three is registered with a mental illness. The most significant changes are observed in the group of young (aged under 25 years) homeless persons; there is a decrease in this cohort from 23 to 17%, the proportion with daily custody of a child/children decreased from 20 to 13%, and the reduction of evictions from 26 to 18%. The national interventions and priorities described in the next section reflect the profile of the homeless population. The reduction of young homeless individuals and decrease in homeless families with children may also be understood as a result of the high priority of these two groups during the last years.

## From Staircase to Housing Led

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This section goes through the four national interventions to prevent and reduce homelessness since 2000. The projects, strategies and programs have many elements and this policy review describes the primary features of the interventions, which also in the long run best explain the reduction of homelessness.

### *Project Homeless*

The first census activated the first initiative to prevent and fight homelessness. While the homeless survey was embedded in housing research and carried out by the Norwegian Building Research Institute,<sup>10</sup> the policy initiative came from the Ministry of Social Affairs.<sup>11</sup> In White Paper No. 50 (1998-99) (St.meld. nr. 50 [1998-99]), the Ministry launched a pilot project aiming to develop models and methods for reducing homelessness. Interestingly, in retrospect, the White Paper explicitly pronounced that the staircase of transition model should frame the development and trials. The succeeding project plan maintained the staircase of transition as

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<sup>10</sup> The social science research department of Norwegian Building Research Institute joined the Norwegian Urban Research Institute in 2006.

<sup>11</sup> From 2008 split into The Health Directorate and The Welfare and Labour Directorate (NAV).

the principal approach to alleviate homelessness. This first initiative, titled Project Homeless, ran from 2001 to 2004 and included the seven largest cities and towns in Norway.

Simultaneously the staircase of transition model, which was the established approach to homelessness in Sweden, was sharply criticized by Swedish researchers (e.g. Löftstrand, 2005; Sahlin, 2005; Sahlin, 2008). In short, the staircase of transition demands changes in life style before the person will get a tenancy, and furthermore, the qualification for a tenancy is organized in several steps on which the person gets extended rights on his/hers way up the staircase. The criticism, supported by research evidence, maintained that few persons actually reached the last step and got an ordinary tenancy.

During the project period, the principal idea shifted from the staircase of transition to a housing led approach. This change of fundamental idea is of vital importance for the subsequent initiatives and strategies to prevent and reduce homelessness. Without a ranking, the below listed issues were of importance (Dyb, 2005):

- Although the Ministry of Social Affairs launched the project, The Norwegian State Housing Bank (the Housing Bank) became the principal coordinator of Project Homeless on the national level. The Health and Social Directorate contributed with funding for developing follow up services in housing (Hansen *et al.*, 2007). With the Housing Bank as the principal coordinator and main stakeholder the project was embedded in the housing sector on state level, which was vital for the change towards a housing led approach. Project funding and the Housing Bank's financial instruments (housing allowance, loans etc.) was made available.
- Project Homeless was a trial that should develop models and methods to alleviate homelessness in particular among the most vulnerable individuals with addiction to alcohol and substances and/or mental illness. However, there was not much new thinking in the staircase model. Projects that promote new ideas tend to attract persons with ambitions to change the dominant approach. Many employees engaged in the project grabbed the opportunity to do something for the most in need; those who had circulated on the "staircase" between shelters, prison and detox facilities. In other words, there was an internal drive for change on the implementing level.

- The majority of the target group had had a tenancy once or several times, and had to prove ability to live independently, by going through treatment or convincingly prove abstinence to get a new tenancy in social housing. Proving ability to live independently was embedded in the allocation criterion for social housing in the larger cities and in many other municipalities. However, in Oslo the criterion was about to change in this respect and other municipalities followed, which signified a change in approach.
- Between the first and second homeless census (from 1996 to 2003), the number of homeless persons fell from 6200 to 5200. The one and only reason for the decrease was a reduction of homelessness in Oslo by 50%, mainly resulting from a targeted intervention through “the hostel project”. The hostel project made a thorough review of the persons staying in the homeless hostels, and found that the clients made up a far more differentiated group than anticipated. People were moved out of the hostels and into municipal owned flats<sup>12</sup> or they were assisted with getting a flat in the private market. The hostel project in Oslo is important because it signalled a change in approach to homeless people, and because it demonstrates that homelessness may be significantly reduced with the right methods and targeted effort.

Project Homeless was a trial project implemented in the largest municipalities. The idea of a housing led approach, to house homeless people as the method of alleviating homelessness, was not spread nationwide. The idea also met resistance in the project municipalities and elsewhere. Discussions of the meaning of independent living, and how to house people with severe health and social problems continued. The Health and Social Directorate provided funding to develop services in housing. Norway has no tradition for social housing education, like for instance in the UK (Anderson *et al.*, 2012). Developing service provision corresponding to the needs of the homeless individuals with complex needs and often a long history of homelessness was set on the agenda.

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<sup>12</sup> A negative effect was more short term tenancies, due to the need for higher turnover in social housing, and further, the composition of the tenant group has changed toward more social problems, which also effects the surroundings and has increased the social stigma especially in areas with many and congregated municipal-owned dwellings.

**Table 2: National projects, strategies and programs from 2001: main objectives, approaches and stakeholders**

Project/strategy	Objectives	Main approach and stakeholder(s)
Project Homeless 2001-2002	<p>Develop and establish housing solutions and models to fight and prevent homelessness.</p> <p>Try out various forms of assistance and establish cross-department services.</p> <p>Collate and disseminate experiences.</p>	<p>National development project implemented in the seven largest municipalities.</p> <p>First phase: The staircase of transition outlined as a frame for development.</p> <p>Second phase: A change towards a housing led approach.</p> <p>The municipalities received state funding and guidance.</p> <p>National coordinator: The Housing Bank</p>
National strategy to fight and prevent homelessness: The pathway to a permanent home 2005-2007	<p>Three primary objectives were set: To prevent people from becoming homeless, to improve the quality of overnight shelters and to ensure homeless people are re-housed without undue delay.</p>	<p>Housing led approach.</p> <p>A combination of performance targets and inter-department and multi-level governance.</p> <p>Principally the strategy encompassed all municipalities, however the cities and larger municipalities made up the majority of participants.</p> <p>The participating municipalities received state funding and guidance.</p> <p>National coordinator: The Housing Bank</p>
Social Housing Development Program (The Housing Bank's municipality program) 2009-2017	<p>Long-term partnership between the Housing Bank and the municipalities experiencing the most social housing policy challenges.</p> <p>Local/municipal set targets/objectives based on external evaluations identifying the main challenges and problems.</p> <p>Target group expanded to disadvantaged households.</p>	<p>Housing led approach is well established. The overall strategy is preventing and fighting homelessness, increased activity and increased knowledge about social housing work in the municipalities.</p> <p>Active use of the Housing Bank's financial instruments (housing allowance, start-up loan etc.) locally is expected, but project funding reduced.</p> <p>National coordinator: The Housing Bank.</p>
Housing for welfare. National strategy for housing and support services 2014-2020	<p>Shared responsibility – shared goals. Main goals:</p> <p>Everyone should have a good place to live</p> <p>Everyone with a need for services, will receive assistance in managing their living</p> <p>Public effort shall be comprehensive and effective</p> <p>Target group: disadvantaged households</p>	<p>Housing led and comprehensive. The strategy plan is signed by the five Ministers responsible for welfare areas</p> <p>Weight on multi-level and horizontal co-governance and innovation</p> <p>Policy areas expanded to neighbourhood development, housing quality and the overall planning in the municipalities.</p> <p>The Social Housing development Program is part of the strategy.</p> <p>National coordinator: The Housing Bank</p>

### ***“A Permanent Home”***

In the proceeding national program, National Strategy to Prevent and Combat Homelessness “The Pathway to a Permanent Home” 2005-2007, the housing led approach was spelled out in the title. The strategy built on the experience from Project Homeless, but diverged from the project on several aspects. Institutionally, the strategy was still embedded in the Housing Bank on a national level in close cooperation with the Welfare and Labour Directorate<sup>13</sup> (NAV). The Housing Bank scaled up the project funding available for participating municipalities. Now, a large number of municipalities was involved and got access to project funding. The competence funding was also spent on an increasing number of social housing courses offered at university colleges. Until then courses addressing social housing issues were sparse and random (Anderson *et al.*, 2012). Most of the new courses were and still are further education offered to social workers and other welfare professionals aiming to increase the knowledge of how to meet and assist homeless individuals with complex needs. Other arenas of learning and exchange of experience were established by the Housing Bank and NAV.

A peer review of the homeless strategy facilitated by the European Commission emphasized that the strategy was presented under the umbrella of a national housing policy. The synthesis report summarizes that “(h)omelessness is thus targeted as a housing issue and a problem of access to adequate and secure housing, in which the support needs of individual homeless people are one route to achieving and sustaining this goal.” (Edgar, 2006, p.2). The synthesis characterizes the strategy in terms of “housing first”, however the Norwegian strategy did not follow the guidelines of what is recognized as Housing First (Tsemberis *et al.*, 2004). The strategy emphasized a wider housing led approach.

Three primary objectives, to prevent people from becoming homeless, to improve the quality of overnight shelters and to ensure homeless people are re-housed without undue delay, was operationalized into five performance targets:

- Reduce the number of eviction petitions by 50%
- Reduce the number of evictions by 30%.
- No one should stay at an emergency shelter on release from prison and discharge from an institution.
- No one should be offered a shelter place without a quality agreement.
- A maximum length of three months stay in temporary accommodation.

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<sup>13</sup> NAV: The former social division of the Health and Social Directorate.

Mechanisms for monitoring achievements of the targets were set up, but were rather difficult to implement or there were start up problems, which often occur in many new systems.<sup>14</sup> However, the monitoring schemes indicated that the targets were not achieved, which is in accordance with the local authorities evaluation of their performance and achievements (Dyb *et al.*, 2008). It is important to keep in mind that the Norwegian municipalities have extensive autonomy in service provision. Welfare services, except for the National Health Services and some institutions, are provided by the local authorities. Providing a roof over the head of a homeless citizen is phrased as duty put on the municipalities, while access to permanent housing is phrased as a duty to contribute to find a dwelling.<sup>15</sup> The local authorities also held wide autonomy in shaping and defining what is good and/or sufficient quality of a service. Improving the quality of emergency shelters was thus addressed as a performance target and not imposed as a duty.

The autonomy held by the municipalities reduces the state's steering instruments towards the local authorities. National agencies applied soft measures; funding, arenas of mutual learning and cooperation contracts between state agencies. An example of cooperation contract is the one between the Correctional Services and municipalities (usually through the regional level on behalf of the municipalities) regarding release from prison. However, the local authorities chose to work on different targets in accordance with what they perceived as their greatest challenge. Whatever the local achievements would sum up to meet the national performance targets was rather random (Dyb *et al.*, 2008). In 2008, the Office of the General Audit in Norway published a report stating that households and individuals with housing needs did not get the assistance and services they were entitled to (Riksrevisjonen, 2007-2008), which indicated that there was still a way to go. The homeless figures also continued to rise in that period.

In retrospect, one of the most important experiences and learning from the strategy was the dissemination of a housing led approach to homelessness at a large scale in the municipalities, including NGOs working with homelessness. Cooperation on homelessness policy between the welfare ministries on a directorate (the executive body) level was improved through cooperation contracts. A housing led approach also spread among cooperating partners, such as the Correctional Services and to some extent to treatment departments in the National Health Services. Discussions of the meaning of housing led, which was at the core during Project Homeless, continued. Solutions, which hardly differed from an institution in other

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<sup>14</sup> A major issue was lack of routines and/or unclear concepts of what actually to report among municipal employees, enforcement offices and others that provided information about service activities, service users, evictions, etc.

<sup>15</sup> The Social Service Act in the Labour and Welfare Administration.

aspects than that persons living there were tenants and not patients, emerged. Other issues, such as congregation of tenants with complex problems, is still a topic to be addressed.

### *Co-governance*

The Social Housing Development Program followed from 2009 and runs until 2017. The housing led approach is maintained and strengthened and the Housing Bank continues as the principal coordinator at a national level. The program differs from the former Project Homeless and the homeless strategy in its organizing, funding and target groups. Firstly, the largescale competence funding administered by the Housing Bank is reduced. The program relies more on communicative measures, such as guidance, cooperation contracts and learning arenas. The program is based on mutual binding agreements between the Housing Bank and the municipalities. The cooperating municipalities are chosen from those with the largest problems and challenges in the social housing area. The selection by this criterion coincide with the largest municipalities including the four largest cities, thus the larger municipalities constitute the majority of the partners. The advantage of being a cooperating municipality is priority access to all the Housing Bank's services and financial means. The municipality finance or co-finance (with the state) their local projects and activity within their programs, which demands political and administrative commitment to the program.

Eviction from both municipal housing and private rental housing has been an issue from the very start of the homeless interventions and was explicitly addressed in the national strategy 2005-2007. Thus, while the former project and strategy focused on homelessness, the program addresses a wider group of vulnerable households and individuals, primarily households at risk of eviction and households living in unsuitable dwellings and conditions. People experiencing homelessness are still at the core of the program. The municipalities identify their most important target groups and the challenges they want to prioritize. The purpose of an external pre-analysis that the cooperating municipalities are obliged to commission (financed by the Housing Bank), is to have an objective eye and analysis of the challenges and how to prioritize within the scope of their available means.<sup>16</sup> On the national level, the program expanded the co-governance or joined-up governance between policy areas. The program was initially supported by four ministries (extended to five, see below).

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<sup>16</sup> The pre-analyses are conducted by research institutes and consultancies in the housing area.

## *Housing for Welfare*

The prevailing national strategy, Housing for Welfare, runs from 2014 to 2020. The strategy document is signed by five Ministers: Minister of Local Government and Modernisation (the Housing Bank's Ministry), Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Minister of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, Minister of Health and Care Services and Minister of Justice and Public Security; in short, all the welfare ministries have signed the main strategy document. The cooperation between the Ministries through their directorates is coordinated by the Housing Bank. The primary strategic goals are:

- Everyone should have a good place to live.
- Everyone with a need for services will receive assistance in managing their living arrangements.
- Public effort shall be comprehensive and effective.

The goals are broken down to the following priority focus areas: assistance from temporary to permanent housing and provide assistance to find a suitable home, preventing evictions and providing follow-up services in the home, securing good management and goal orientation, stimulate new ideas and social innovation and planning for good living arrangements. The need for cooperation was recognized in the very first project, Project Homeless, however the acknowledgement of the importance of co-governance has increased throughout almost two decades of national intervention programs. One example of co-governance is that a national program against child poverty under the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion should contribute to achieving the objectives of Housing for Welfare.

The direct impact of the present strategy on reducing homelessness is difficult to evaluate, because the last survey was conducted in 2016 is at an early stage of the strategy implementation. Ongoing process evaluations have not yet published any results. The Social Housing Development Program is part of the strategy. As mentioned above, there are five ministries with five equivalent policy fields behind the strategy. The Social Housing Development program is the Housing Bank's main instrument for implementing the strategy in the municipalities. An evaluation of the program found increased social housing competence in the participating municipalities. Procedures and systems for housing allocation and services had improved. The municipalities were on the "right way", however there were no adequate measures for the results for the end-user (Grønningsæter *et al.*, 2014).

A short note on the difference between 'housing led' and Housing First: A number of municipalities have established Housing First project primarily guided by the principles of Housing First projects in New York (Tsemberis *et al.*, 2004). Housing First is defined as a narrower intervention designated for individuals with complex

needs, while 'housing led' is a wider approach under which Housing First is one element. Housing First projects are one of the interventions some municipalities have established.

## Measuring and Alleviating Homelessness

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There is a close connection between the homeless census and the political initiatives that followed since the first national census in 1996. This part discusses three points, which highlights the connection between the censuses, policies and interventions:

- The censuses broadened and set the concept and definition of homelessness.
- Specific groups of homeless and specific problems identified in the census have been addressed and focused in the programs and strategies.
- The number of homeless persons measured in the censuses is a 'litmus test' on the efficiency of the work on national and local levels.

Regarding the first point; the homeless population is quite well defined compared to other vulnerable groups in the housing market. The definition was established for research purposes, but became the "official" concept and definition of homelessness almost immediately. Before the first census in 1996 there were no exact definition of homelessness. The social services and the registration office apply the term 'without fixed address' (u.f.b.) in their files. However, the term embraces a smaller group than the population of homeless covered by the censuses. The administrative regulation to the Act of the Registration Office is rather vague regarding the situations when a person is without fixed address. The regulation states that persons without fixed address in a municipality are considered settled in that municipality depending on the duration of the stay and other circumstances.

Individuals in prison are considered settled in the place of residence before imprisonment. Individuals without an address at the time of imprisonment are considered settled at the place of residence (the prison). The same rule applies for individuals in institutions in general. Persons in institutions under drug and alcohol treatment are considered settled at the institution when the duration of the stay is one year or more.<sup>17</sup> By the definition used in the survey, people in prison and institutions are counted as homeless if they are without a dwelling of their own two months or less before release or discharge.

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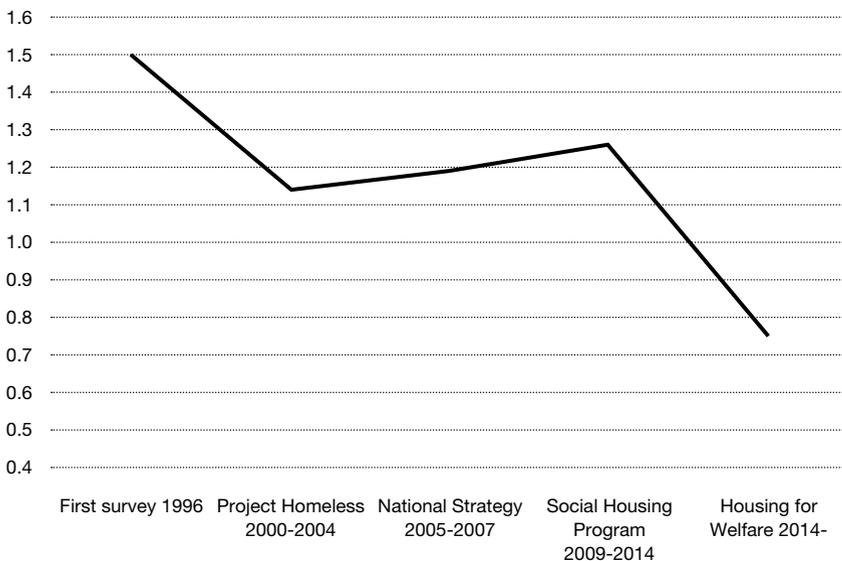
<sup>17</sup> Source: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/forskrift/2007-11-09-1268>

About the second point, a couple of examples may highlight how the census identifies particularly vulnerable groups and informs about the number and profile. In the survey conducted in 2008, a new question about whether the person is homeless together with her/his minor children was added to the questionnaire, which uncovered that 400 children were homeless with their parent(s) during the one week of registration. In 2012, the number of homeless children staying together with a parent was nearing 700. Based on the results from the surveys and further informed by research on child poverty, homeless families with children that are homeless or living in precarious conditions are one of the prioritized target groups of the strategy Housing for Welfare.

Young persons experiencing homelessness is another group closely monitored through the homeless surveys. Young homeless persons is another target group in the prevailing strategy Housing for Welfare. The number of homeless below 25 years shows an increase until 2008, when the figures flattened out and decreased from 2012 and 2016. Both the actual numbers and the share of persons under 25 years fell (see Figure 1 above).

Figure 2 shows the development of the number of homeless during each of the national projects, strategies and programs, as an introduction to the discussion of the third point above.

**Figure 2. Number of homeless per 1 000 population and national programs/strategies.**



The curve shows the tendencies and marks the occurrence of sharp changes. The steep downward turn between 1996 and 2003 is already accounted for; the decrease is mainly explained by one targeted activity in Norway's capital, Oslo. Between 2003 and 2012, the curve shows a slight but steady increase, from 1.14 per 1 000 population to 1.27 in 2008 and 1.26 in 2012. The number of homeless people increased somewhat from 2008 to 2012, but due to growth of the population in Norway, the relative figures decreased slightly. The homeless surveys is one but very important and the most reliable indication of the effects from the strategies and programs initiated by the national authorities and implemented in the municipalities.

The interventions from around 2010 have some specific qualities. The target groups are extended beyond those who experience homelessness to individuals and households at risk of homelessness and in precarious housing. Thus, preventing homelessness is high on the agenda. Emphasis on co-governance or joined up governance involves the policy areas with responsibilities and means to address the complex needs of some groups but also the differentiated needs of the target groups. These elements points to a much wider approach compared to Project Homeless (2001-2004) and the strategy, 'The Pathway to a Permanent Home (2005-2006)'.

The prevailing program and strategy is at the same time more targeted. Firstly, the participating municipalities are chosen by size and extent of challenges in social housing policy. Secondly, the chosen municipalities are asked to direct their local programs and initiatives towards the most important issues and burning questions locally. Many of the municipalities do work on a series of projects and interventions. One example is municipalities that use the Housing Bank's financial means to assist people to move from the rental market to become homeowners (project: "From Tenancy to Homeownership"). In a country with 80% home ownership, staying in the rental market has some disadvantage. The limited rental market is unprofessional and volatile. Contracts of two years or shorter are not uncommon, resulting in frequent moves of housing. Renting is not less expensive than buying a home, however, the least affluent households will not get a loan on ordinary conditions from a bank. Start-up loans in combination with housing allowance and/or subsidy help some of those rejected on ordinary conditions in the banks to buy a home. In a few municipalities the reduction of homelessness is among others explained by practicing "from tenancy to homeownership" on a relatively large scale. This is but one example of innovative interventions in the social housing field.

Another important feature in some municipalities with high achievements (reduction in homelessness) is that social housing policy is integrated in the overall planning and ordinary housing plans. Affordable housing for sale and rental housing for the least affluent households is part of the plans for construction and infrastructure locally. However, the housing market is largely private in both ends. Construction projects

for housing are planned and implemented by private enterprises. The local authorities has the competence to regulate the areas and approve or disapprove on the projects. Usually, there are negotiations between the entrepreneurs and authorities and not uncommon that those living in the neighbourhood are part of the negotiations. There are examples of approval of plans under the condition of providing a certain share of affordable dwellings, where this part of the projects never came to realization.<sup>18</sup> There are also examples of successful cooperation between private enterprises and local authorities regarding provision of affordable dwellings.

### ***Services and Social Support***

This paper has not focused on the development of services in connection with housing persons with complex needs. There has been and still are different initiatives addressing better knowledge and better services. The existing municipal home care services did not cope with providing services to clients with addiction and/or mental illness. The issue was identified as a lack of professional competence about the needs of the group. Competence development had started already with Project Homeless in the early 2000's along two lines: in the practice field and in the formal education system. Firstly, some of the municipalities set up a few positions called 'housing support' (booppfølging). The professional background of the employees filling the positions were indeed varied, although the majority had background and training in social work. These pioneers, that actually started up floating services for (former) homeless persons, developed knowledge and more or less defined what to do and how to do it along the road (Dyb, 2005; Hansen *et al.*, 2007; Ytrehus *et al.*, 2008).

Secondly, further education courses in social housing work developed rapidly in several university colleges usually under the umbrella of social work education. Housing issues and how to meet the needs of (former) homeless individuals are also integrated in further education courses about addiction and psychiatry work in the municipalities. Some of the courses are evaluated (e.g. Grønningsæter, 2015), but there are no joint evaluation or comparison of the content and the students of the various courses. Housing First contributed with a "new" services dimension; assertive community treatment (ACT), which is widely used within Housing First. However ACT was already applied by floating teams supporting people with mental illness often organised in cooperation with the National health services and municipalities. Today social housing work has a wider connotation. The term is used to describe all types activities, work and methods oriented towards moving people from homelessness into housing, preventing homelessness and supporting people.

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<sup>18</sup> The latest large scale construction of apartments on Oslo's sea side is a well known example.

## Conclusion

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The main argument of the paper is that reduction in homelessness follows a long period of national policy addressing the issue from different angles. What is just as important is the overall housing led approach to homelessness from the early 2000's. A housing led approach was not inevitable from the very beginning. Project Homeless started out framing the trials within the staircase of transition after the Swedish model. Institutional embeddedness in housing policy through the national coordination of the Housing Bank is vital for the turn from the staircase model to housing led, and for the persistent focus on housing in the succeeding strategies and programs.

The decrease in the number of homeless individuals brought about an expectation of an increase in the share with the most complex problems in connection with addiction and mental illness. The idea of a residual group, sometimes labelled "hard to house", was not confirmed. The profile of the population of homeless in 2016 is rather similar to that of the previous surveys. The majority are single men between 25 and 45 years. The share with dependency on drugs and/or alcohol is about the same and the share with a mental illness dropped insignificantly. Moreover, there is no substantial increase in the share of long term homeless individuals. People with a long history as homeless still dominate, but the share that experience homelessness as a new and acute problem is 21 and 22 per cent in 2016 and 2012. Of course, there are changes, like the decrease in the share of young people and almost absence of homeless families with minor children. The latter do appear in the data though, and almost all have recently become homeless.

At the moment, and after the positive results measured by the homeless survey there is a discussion about aiming at zero vision in the field of homelessness, meaning there should be no homeless persons in Norway, or at least that should be the vision for the work. However, social problems tend to reappear. Homelessness is a problem that needs to be addressed continuously and met with the right approaches. An overall housing led approach must continue to guide the policy, however financial and human recourses, including competence and people, is needed in order to maintain the results from 2016.

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