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# The Effectiveness of Homeless Policies – Variations among the Scandinavian Countries

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› **Abstract\_** *This article discusses similarities among and differences between the three Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, in homeless policies and their effectiveness. The article identifies variations between Denmark, Norway and Sweden in the levels and distribution of homelessness, nationally and among different cities and towns based on almost identical national surveys of homelessness in the three countries. A similar pattern in the rate of homelessness can be seen among the largest Scandinavian cities whereas some differences are observed among other larger towns and cities. Current homelessness intervention strategies in the three countries have quite a few common characteristics. However, the approaches and policies on homelessness differ overall. This article contends that homeless policies develop in the intersection between housing and social policy; the three countries are mainly similar with regard to welfare institutions but widely divergent in housing policy and housing regimes. A second contention of the article is that differences in homeless policy derive from differences in housing policy in the respective countries. Effectiveness measured by the number of homeless people is explained by general approaches in homeless policies.*

› **Key Words\_** *homelessness; homeless survey; housing; policy; national strategy*

## Introduction

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This article analyses experiences and difference in three Scandinavian countries with regards to the effectiveness of homeless policies. The Nordic welfare states are generally characterised by high standards of living, low levels of poverty and a high degree of equality between socioeconomic groups. Though these countries have undergone considerable reforms in the 1980s and 1990s they are still characterised by relatively high social expenditure and universalistic principles of access to welfare services and benefits. Broadly the Nordic group encompasses five countries: Denmark; Finland; Iceland; Norway; and Sweden. However, when speaking about the Nordic 'social democratic welfare regimes' (Esping-Andersen, 1990; 1999) the term frequently refers to the smaller group of countries consisting of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. This paper focuses on these three countries, but also pays some attention to Finland. The choice is mainly grounded in the availability of comparable data on homelessness offered by almost identical national homeless surveys in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Finland can be considered a pioneer in conducting homeless surveys and in policymaking in a Nordic context, but the Finnish data is not quite comparable with the other three countries. Iceland has not really been visible in the homelessness discussion, although there is a rising awareness and interest in homelessness issues in the country. A second element which strengthens the comparability aspect of the paper across three countries, is that Finland and in particular Iceland, which has been governed by Conservative parties throughout most of the post World War II period, diverge somewhat from the social democratic welfare ideology. However, one may argue that social democratic welfare institutions and arrangements are universally adopted in all five Nordic states.

Nevertheless, focussing on the three typical social democratic welfare regimes may help to accentuate variations between these countries. The differences that exist, particularly in housing policy, but also to some extent in social policy are often overlooked. Differences are also reflected in the area of homelessness both in terms of regional variations in the level of homelessness as well as in the characteristics of intervention types. We take a point of departure in commonalities and differences in the distributions and characteristics of homelessness based on the national counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, which have followed very similar definitions and designs.

The article is organised into five main sections. The first section aims to establish a connection between the fields of housing policy, social policy and homelessness. Section two presents patterns of homelessness statistics in Denmark, Norway and Sweden; followed in section three by a comparison of national homeless interven-

tion strategies. The fourth section discusses the overall national approaches to homelessness in the three countries, while section five discusses the links between housing policy and approaches to homelessness.

## Housing policy, social policy and homelessness

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This section aims to look in brief at the connections between housing policy and welfare policy with a particular focus on social policy structures and homelessness. Housing policies are often considered one of the cornerstones of the modern welfare state. This contention has however been challenged and contested by academics within housing research. It is significant that Esping-Andersen does not include housing as a parameter in constructing his ideal types of welfare regimes. Ulf Torgersen's (1987) frequently quoted metaphor "housing – the wobbly pillar under the welfare state" characterises the particularity of housing compared to the three solid pillars: education; health; and pensions. Bo Bengtsson takes a step further in separating housing from the basic commitments of the welfare state. The core concept in Bengtsson's (2006; 2001; 1995) academic work on housing is "housing – the commodity of the welfare state". A central point in Bengtsson's analyses is that housing is largely governed by the market, while state interventions are aimed at alleviating negative consequences of the market. Peter Malpass (2004; 2005) takes a similar position, although developing his arguments along a different path. Malpass concludes that development of the housing system is driven by forces other than those propelling the welfare state; however, development of the housing sector follows that of the welfare state. It is interesting that these three academics have three very different housing systems as their point of departure, respectively Norway, Sweden and United Kingdom, but by and large they draw similar conclusions.

The separation between the welfare state and housing is an important contribution towards understanding why the Nordic welfare states have developed very divergent housing systems, while the basic welfare structures including social policies and services are principally similar. A work published under the title *Why so divergent? Nordic housing policy in a comparative historic light* (Bengtsson, 2006 ed.) is the most extensive research so far aiming to explain the disparity of the housing systems in the five Nordic countries. We will draw on these analyses in the further discussions.

Homelessness is often understood either as a housing issue or one of welfare (Neal, 1997). Our point of departure is that both the housing system and the structures of the social services contribute to shaping homeless policies and interventions. Social services are far more compatible between the Nordic countries than are housing issues, but there are some significant differences regarding homeless services. In

Denmark, Norway and Sweden the obligation to intervene in situations of homelessness is grounded in the Social Services Act. In Denmark, the Act has particular paragraphs addressing homeless services, which is not the case in Norway and Sweden. None of the countries have statutory rights to housing and the obligation to assist with acquiring a home for those not able to find a home in the market is rather vaguely addressed. This also gives local social authorities considerable room to interpret and develop modes of interventions in homeless services and local policies. This is also one of the premises for understanding national and even local homeless policies and will be further pursued in the next sections.

### **Patterns of homelessness in the Scandinavian countries**

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Since the 1990s national counts have been carried out in Norway and Sweden following a similar design based on surveys to services and authorities within the field of homelessness. In each national count, relevant service providers and public authorities have been asked to fill out a questionnaire for each individual with whom they are in contact or whom they know to be homeless in a certain week. As the method is comprehensive and therefore demanding for the participating services, the counts are not carried out annually, but with intervals of a few years. In 2007 the first national count took place in Denmark following the same method. Finland has established a system for conducting annual surveys of homeless persons and households.

The definitions of homelessness in Denmark, Norway and Sweden are quite similar, although there are some minor variations among the countries. In all three countries the count includes such groups as rough sleepers, hostel users and individuals living in temporary supported accommodation, as well as in institutions or prisons from which they are due to be released within a short period of time (two months in the Norwegian count, three months in the Danish survey, while the Swedish count encompasses both intervals). The definition also includes categories for people staying temporarily with friends and family. The latest Swedish count also included people in institutions and treatment facilities who had no dwelling, but who were not to be released within a short time. In the following tables, this group from the Swedish count has been left out, while the rates that include this figure have been put in parentheses. A further complication is that different weighting procedures

have been used<sup>1</sup>. Finland applies a slightly different definition. The most significant difference is that Finland registers persons living in nursing homes, institutions and hospitals who lack housing, regardless of time of discharge. There is also an important methodological difference likely to influence the figures. All surveys are cross section registrations. The Danish, Norwegian and Swedish surveys are conducted during one specific week, while the Finnish registration is carried out during one day. An important similarity however, is that all surveys are conducted through a range of services expected to be in touch with, or know of, homeless persons. Thus the figures from all four countries encompass and are delimited to homeless people in contact with, or known by the respondents.

Below we examine the results from the most recent counts in Denmark (2007), Norway (2005) and Sweden (2005). Table 1 shows the overall figure of homelessness in all three countries and the rate per 1000 inhabitants. Although the rate of homelessness is probably relatively low in international comparison, it is still noticeable that homelessness remains a substantial problem despite the relatively comprehensive measures aimed at reducing homelessness in the Scandinavian countries.

**Table 1\_ Homelessness in the Scandinavian countries**

Country	Population	Homeless	Homeless per 1000 inhabitants
Sweden (2005)	9,048,000	11,434 (17,834)	1.3 (2.0)
Denmark (2007)	5,447,000	5,253	1.0
Norway (2005)	4,618,000	5,496	1.2

The rate of homelessness is slightly higher in Sweden with 1.3 per 1000 inhabitants compared to a rate of 1.2 in Norway and 1.0 in Denmark. The differences are small and should not be exaggerated. As we shall discuss later in further detail, the 'staircase of transition' model has, to a wide extent, been implemented in Sweden, whereas this type of intervention is not used in Denmark or Norway. This means that the Swedish count may also include individuals living in municipalities' sub-lets, but without permanent contracts. We find a similar uncertainty in Norway regarding

<sup>1</sup> For Denmark and Sweden the figures represent an observed count, whereas for Norway the figure represents a weighted count. In Norway the count includes all larger towns and cities but a sample was taken among smaller municipalities. In the Norwegian count two sets of weights have been adopted. First of all a weight has been introduced to adjust for the municipalities not included in the sample. This brings the observed Norwegian figure of 3,483 persons to a weighted figure of 4,681 thus correcting for municipalities not included in the count. The number of 5,496 arises by further weighting for respondents who have not responded to the survey. A similar weighting procedure has not been adopted in Denmark and Sweden. The Norwegian figure of 4,681 (weighted only for un-sampled municipalities) corresponds to a total rate of 1.0 homeless per 1000, similar to the Danish rate.

persons living in publicly owned blocks of bed-sits with irregular and short term contracts. They should not be counted, but are likely to be registered by some respondents. In this way differences in the definitions also reflect actual differences in intervention types among the three countries.

When we disaggregate the overall figures we get some further indication of differences between the countries; and especially of variation within each country by comparing larger cities and towns<sup>2</sup>. The rates of homelessness are relatively high in the largest cities in all three countries. We have separated the capitals of the three countries for the reason that the capital areas are recognised as being subject to the accumulation of social problems and strong pressure in the housing market. A second group covers municipalities with 200,000 inhabitants and above (capitals taken out); a third group comprises municipalities between 100,000 and 199,999 inhabitants.

As shown in table 2 there is a level of 3.8 homeless per 1000 inhabitants in Copenhagen, compared with 2.3 in Stockholm and 2.4 in Oslo. It is interesting to note that among the capitals Copenhagen ranks first, whereas we find an opposite picture in the other groups, where the Danish cities are placed at the lower end of the scale. Among cities with 200,000 inhabitants and above, Bergen (Norway), Gothenburg and Malmö (Sweden) have relatively more homeless people than their respective capitals, while the figure for Aarhus (Denmark) is far below that of Copenhagen. In the medium sized municipalities the Swedish cities are relatively higher and in most cases closer to those of the largest cities. In Swedish towns such as Helsingborg and Örebro we find rates of 2.4 and 1.8, whereas in Norway and Denmark the figures for comparable towns are somewhat lower. In particular, a quite large difference between the capital and other larger towns and cities is found in Denmark, with rates of 1.1 in Aarhus, 1.0 in Odense and 0.8 in Aalborg. One exception seems to be the Norwegian city of Bergen, where the level of homelessness of 3.2 is 50% higher than in Oslo. In the Norwegian cities of Trondheim and Stavanger we find relatively low rates.

The differences among the countries should not be exaggerated and, particularly for some medium-sized Swedish towns like the university towns of Uppsala and Linköping, the figures resemble the relatively low rates found in Danish provincial towns. However, behind the national rates are quite substantial differences among the cities. There is a general similarity among the largest cities, but some differ-

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<sup>2</sup> For reasons of aggregation in the figures represented in the three national counts, it was not possible for this article to include comparable categories for smaller towns and municipalities. Generally the rates of homelessness are relatively small in the rural regions in all three countries.

ences among medium-sized cities and towns. Quite possibly, higher rates in the Swedish towns and cities may 'carry' some of the difference in the national rate.

**Table 2\_ Homelessness in groups of municipalities in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Total figures and per 1000 inhabitants (figures in parenthesis include an extended definition, see explanation above)**

Municipalities by population	Country	Population	Homeless	Homeless per 1000 inhabitants
<b>Capital</b>				
Copenhagen	Dk	496,000	1886	3.8
Oslo	No	530,000	1244	2.4
Stockholm	Se	772,000	1783 (3863)	2.3 (5.0)
<b>Above 200,000 inhabitants*</b>				
Bergen	No	239,000	770	3.3
Gothenburg	Se	458,000	1488 (2620)	3.1 (5.4)
Malmö	Se	270,000	796 (945)	2.9 (3.5)
Aarhus	Dk	299,000	337	1.1
<b>100.000-199.000 inhab.</b>				
Helsingborg	Se	120,000	294 (540)	2.4 (4.5)
Ørebro	Se	127,000	224 (394)	1.8 (3.1)
Norrköping	Se	125,000	225 (388)	1.8 (3.1)
Stavanger	No	113,500	184	1.6
Vesterås	Se	133,000	140 (199)	1.1 (1.5)
Trondheim	No	157,000	165	1.1
Odense	Dk	186,000	189	1.0
Linköping	Se	135,000	128 (244)	0.9 (1.8)
Uppsala	Se	185,000	163 (316)	0.9 (1.8)
Aalborg	Dk	195,000	158	0,8

\*Except for the capitals. Sources: Socialstyrelsen, (2006a); Benjaminsen & Christensen (2007); Hansen *et al.*, (2005).

## National strategies and local responsibilities

Interventions towards homelessness are generally integrated into the mainstream social service provision by regulation of the respective national laws on social services. Another characteristic of the provision of services for marginal groups is that a local responsibility is anchored mainly in the municipalities. The social service laws enable municipalities to establish a range of services, but there is no statutory right to housing in any of the three countries. Services for vulnerable groups are almost entirely publicly funded although NGOs are often involved in running the services.

In Denmark, the law on social services defines a specified range of interventions such as homeless hostels, intermediate supported housing, long-term supported housing, social support attached to the individual, social drop-in centres and substance misuse treatment. As mentioned above, the statutory obligations on interventions in the case of homelessness are far more general in Sweden and Norway. In Finland, the right to housing has a stronger legal base than in other Nordic countries, as it is grounded in the constitution. A key feature of developments in recent years is that national strategies have been adopted to strengthen interventions towards homelessness in all three countries. Table 3 summarises the objectives of the latest national strategies and the period covered by the strategies.

There is a clear aim stated explicitly in the Danish and Swedish strategies that no one should need to sleep rough on the streets. In Denmark and Norway there is an aim to reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation. Particularly in Sweden it is mentioned that the pathway into ordinary housing should be made easier for those who are in accommodation characterised by the staircase model, which is elaborated in the next section of the article. The Swedish and Norwegian strategies focus on reducing the number of evictions, thereby shifting the focus into preventative measures. Furthermore, in Denmark there is an increased focus on evictions and a separate action plan to reduce evictions is in the political pipeline. Finally, in the Norwegian strategy, the quality of temporary accommodations and hostels is also mentioned, as it is stated that these services should follow quality agreements.

The aims of the national strategies are relatively ambitious, but the actual realisation of the goals within the strategies is, of course, shaped by many factors including local implementation processes. They are also following different time schedules. The Norwegian strategy period is finished and has been evaluated (Dyb *et al.*, 2008); Sweden is in the middle of the period, while the Danish strategy is due to be implemented from 2009. All three countries have had different earlier intervention programmes which were forerunners for the strategies reported in table 3.

A recent evaluation in Denmark focused on a programme which ran from 2003-2005, which was aimed at strengthening services and interventions for vulnerable or marginal groups in Denmark's six largest cities (the so-called city programme) as part of the Government programme *Common Responsibility*. The evaluation showed that the programme strengthened the supply of services by providing a range of targeted interventions such as alternative nursing homes for elderly homeless substance users, staircase communities and social support in ordinary housing. Compared to previous programmes it was a success of this programme that the projects were very precisely targeted at specific sub-groups among vulnerable groups such as the mentally ill, substance users and homeless

**Table 3\_ National homelessness strategies**

Country	Sweden	Denmark	Norway
<b>Title of strategy</b>	Homelessness – many faces – common responsibility	Strategy to abolish involuntary homelessness	The pathway to a permanent home
<b>Period</b>	2007-2009	2009-2011	2005-2007
<b>Elements</b>			
<b>Rough sleeping</b>	Everybody should be guaranteed a roof over their head and be offered coordinated services adapted to individual needs.	Homeless persons should not need to sleep in the street.	
<b>Housing on release from prison, discharge from institution</b>	The number of men and women who are enrolled in the penal system or treatment units and who have no housing plan upon discharge should be reduced.	Secure a housing solution upon release from prison or hospitals.	No one shall have to spend time in temporary accommodation upon release from prison or discharge from institution.
<b>Evictions</b>	The number of evictions should be reduced and no children should be evicted.		The number of eviction notices shall be reduced by 50% and evictions by 30%.
<b>Temporary accommodation/ hostels</b>		Reducing the time in a hostel to no more than 3-4 months for those who are ready to live on their own with support. Young people should not need to stay in a hostel, but be given other solutions after the laws on social service and housing.	No one shall stay more than three months in temporary accommodation provision. No one shall be offered overnight shelter without a quality agreement.
<b>Support</b>	The pathway into ordinary housing should be made easier for those in 'staircase' housing, training apartments and so on.	Strengthening outreach street work, creating a better flow through homeless hostels by creating more flexible forms of supported housing, which meet the needs of the homeless.	

long-term substance users. Especially in larger provincial towns, municipal officials argued that by expanding the range of interventions available both in types and numbers it became easier for municipalities to match the users to specific services given the character of the users' problems (Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2006). In addition, in Copenhagen, the programme helped increase the variety and capacity of supported housing available but, at the same time, local actors argued that the gap between the demand from users with a need for special housing interventions and the range and availability of services was still quite substantial. The new Danish strategy mentions a continued aim to strengthen the provision of staircase communities, transitional housing with support, 'skaeve huse' and municipal supported accommodation.

The previous Danish programme mentioned above was characterised by a relatively substantial pool of project-based funding from central Government to municipalities<sup>3</sup>. This raised the question of how to achieve long-term sustainability and continuation of services. In the programme mentioned above it was a condition for receiving funding from central Government that municipalities should guarantee a continuation of the projects after the project period ran out and should also document that an increase in service provision was achieved, so that the new services did not replace existing ones. After the project period, an increase in general block grants was given to municipalities which, although only partly, compensated municipalities for new expenses. The evaluation showed that this 'guarantee of added services' had been largely fulfilled by the municipalities involved. As the use of central Government project funding is generally a widespread tool to increase service provision for vulnerable groups at the local level, the example shows how administrative tools can be used to enhance the effectiveness of policies at the implementation level.

As in Denmark, the targets of the Swedish and Norwegian strategies have been shaped and formally adopted at a national level, with strong political support (The Pathway to a Permanent Home, 2005; *Socialstyrelsen*, 2007). Both countries' strategy documents emphasise that a wide range of public and private stakeholders needs to be involved and to cooperate in counteracting homelessness. Nonetheless, due to the decentralised constitutional structure, the municipalities are the core players in carrying out the strategy and achieving targets. The Government has no legal base for instructing the municipalities. The means to achieve central objectives and targets are often, including in this case, financial incentives allocated as

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<sup>3</sup> In the 'City programme' approximately €42m was set aside over the three-year period to improve services for marginal groups in the six cities. In the new Danish homeless strategy €65m has been set aside over the three-year period to provide more forms of supported housing and outreach support.

funding of projects which are in accordance with the national objectives. Core elements in both strategies are the development and transfer of knowledge between stakeholders; funding is largely directed towards development projects. The Danish, Norwegian and Swedish strategies against homelessness represent a case where input (targets and funding) are established at a national level, while output (performance) and outcome (effects and results) are expected to be achieved at a local level. The Government has no sanctions towards municipalities which fail in their pursuit of plans funded by that state, or choose not to participate.

A recent evaluation provides information on success and obstacles concerning the Norwegian strategy (Dyb *et al.*, 2008). First of all it is evident that the objectives quoted in table 3 have not been achieved. For example, the number of both eviction notices and evictions has gone up during the last year of the strategy period (2007) after a decrease in the first two years. The rise in notices and actual evictions is clearly related to increased pressure in the housing market and particularly to a tightened private rented market. Further, the incentives have essentially been targeted at institutional changes and at initiating processes to establish formal cooperation and partnerships both on horizontal and vertical levels between public and private actors, and to establish forums for the exchange of experiences and mutual learning. In addition, national project funding of service development has been provided. In other words, there is no direct correspondence between the specific targets quoted above and the incentives. This type of incentive implies and relies on the bureaucratic organisation's ability to learn from its own experience and that of others, changing in accordance with new learning. However, the bureaucratic organisation, in this case the municipal administration, with its specialised functions, hierarchic structure and statutory duties to perform, has limited ability to learn by experience and to adapt to new learning (Christensen *et al.*, 2007). We do not contest that it is possible to achieve the expected organisational changes, but it normally takes time before the results are visible. The prime obstacle against achievement of the targets identified by the majority of municipalities was a structural one, namely the shortage of housing (Dyb *et al.*, 2008).

The Swedish strategy also follows a nationally initiated and funded programme of local homeless projects over the period 2002 to 2005. The programme was defined as a development project aiming to "develop methods which may be effective in the long term to counteract problems linked to homelessness" (S2002/812/ST quoted in *Socialstyrelsen*, 2006b). Evaluation of the programme shows that earmarked project funding ends up in short-term solutions on many occasions, although some projects also had positive results. Based on findings

from the evaluation<sup>4</sup> of the programme, *Socialstyrelsen* recommends that local authorities should strive primarily to settle homeless families and persons in the ordinary housing market with regular tenancies. The recommendation refers to the system of 'staircase of transition' as discussed below.

## Differences in models of homeless interventions

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In Scandinavia, as in most other western countries, various schemes of supported housing have undergone considerable expansion in recent decades. There has been widespread discussion of the merits of different intervention types following Tsemberis' well-known randomised controlled experiment in the US. This pointed to a better chance of remaining housed following the 'housing first' approach, compared with a control group which received no early housing-based intervention (Tsemberis, 1999; 2004). The argument within the 'housing first' approach is that the housing situation needs to be secured before progress can be expected in other dimensions such as treatment of substance misuse or mental problems (see Atherton and McNaughton, this journal). On the other hand, the so-called 'staircase of transition' is based on the assumption that progress on other problem dimensions, for example substance misuse, has to be achieved first in order to qualify for permanent housing. In other words behavioural conditions are assigned to the achievement of a permanent contract.

The distinction between the 'housing first' and 'housing ready' (staircase) approaches may be too narrow to capture the variation in today's intervention types. The ideal types of homeless interventions in table 4 are based on Brian Harvey's (1998) efforts to systematise the diversity of homeless services. These were as identified in the EU member states in the second half of the 1990s and Ingrid Sahlin's (1996; 1998) comprehensive studies of the 'staircase of transition' model in Sweden. Although Harvey's classification was accomplished ten years ago, a further elaborated version proved to be valuable in analysing homeless intervention models in Norwegian municipalities in 2000 – 2004 (Dyb, 2005) and it remains a useful and legitimate tool (Ytrehus *et al.*, 2008). In the classification we find a distinction between a normalising model, a tiered model and a 'staircase of transition' model.

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<sup>4</sup> *Socialstyrelsen's* evaluation report is based on sixteen separate evaluations of local projects.

**Table 4: Three models of homelessness intervention**

	The normalising model	The tiered model	Staircase of transition
<b>Measure</b>	Moving into independent living in one's own dwelling.	Independent living after an intermediate phase from hostel or similar establishment to independent living.	Hierarchy/staircase of lodging and dwellings; independent living for those who qualify.
<b>Method</b>	Individually designed support.	Tiers of intervention during a settled intermediate phase before independent living.	Differentiated system of sanctions based on withdrawal and expansion of rights and goods.
<b>Ideology</b>	Homeless persons have the same needs as other people, but some need support to obtain a 'life quality'	A negative circle is to be broken through gradual adaption to independent living.	Homeless persons need to learn to live independently and not all will succeed.

Source: Dyb (2005), based on Harvey (1998) and Sahlin (1996).

In Sweden it has been argued that local interventions mainly rely on the staircase model, and criticism has been put forward that this model actually runs the risk of maintaining users in the support system rather than empowering them to independent living in self-contained permanent housing (Sahlin, 1996; 1998). Studies comparing homeless intervention services in Swedish municipalities have brought forward evidence of less effective homeless policies in those municipalities which apply the staircase model compared with those applying less rigid staircase systems or other approaches (Löfstrand, 2005; Sahlin, 2006). The measures applied in Sahlin's (2006) study are the figures of homelessness in municipalities within an interval of ten years and the application of rigid or less rigid 'staircase of transition' models in the respective municipalities. The study shows a higher share of homelessness in municipalities with a distinct staircase approach. This study therefore offers an explanation for differences in homeless rates among Swedish municipalities as shown in table 2. Both Löfstrand and Sahlin highlight a particularly long staircase with highly differentiated steps, in Gothenburg. Gothenburg has the highest share of homeless persons among the Swedish municipalities quoted in table 2 and ranks high in a Nordic context. Evaluations of the local homeless projects 2002-2005 showed that only a few homeless persons had reached the 'top of the staircase' and obtained a regular tenancy, while the majority stayed on different steps of the staircase (*Socialstyrelsen*, 2006b).

The first systematic homeless intervention scheme in Norway, *Project Homeless 2000 – 2004*, was grounded in the Swedish 'staircase of transition' model (White Paper No. 50 [1998-99]). However the discourse within the scheme led to a normal-

ising model which has also been the ideological grounds for dismantling the institutional ward within psychiatry and care of the elderly while replacing institutions with community services. The term 'normalising' rather than 'housing first' is more suited to embracing the Norwegian approach. A core feature of the ideology behind this model is that the individual should not be 'normalised', but should receive support to make him or her able to function and participate in society in accordance with the individual's own qualifications and position. The approach encompasses a wide range of interventions as well as a diversity of 'housing models', from tenancies in 'ordinary' blocks of flats to what is recognised under the term '*skaeve huse*' imported from Denmark. The important feature of *Project Homeless* in Norway was to establish and maintain sustainable tenancies with adequate support when needed. Thus the length of the tenancies for former homeless persons should be considered important in measuring effectiveness. It has, however, been difficult to provide empirical evidence of sustainability. A follow up study of *Project Homeless*, two years later, found it somewhat difficult to trace tenants/users who were settled within the scheme (Ytrehus *et al.*, 2008).

In Denmark a study has suggested that somewhat different local types of interventions can be identified. In towns such as Aalborg and Odense a 'housing first' strategy can be observed, though not explicitly stated in local policies. Eventual referral to social housing with social support is the most common type of intervention after a stay in a homeless hostel. The city of Aarhus has developed a system which, to a greater extent makes use of transitional housing (Fabricius *et al.*, 2005). The system in Aarhus integrates elements of the 'tiered model' as referral of users to public housing with a permanent contract is quite widespread after a stay in transitional housing. Also, in the capital Copenhagen, the local housing interventions are marked by a widespread use of referral to public housing or use of transitional housing aimed at reintegration and normalisation. Even the so-called '*skaeve huse*' operates with permanent contracts. A similar example is found with the so-called 'alternative nursing homes' based on a combination of substance tolerance and permanent contracts.

In this way the staircase model has gained widespread use in Swedish homeless policies, whereas the intervention models in Denmark can mainly be described as being along the 'housing first' path eventually with the modification found in the 'tiered model', while the Norwegian policy is grounded in a 'normalising model'. As quoted above, studies in Swedish municipalities show a close link between application of the staircase model and the homelessness rate. In a comparative light it seems that use of the staircase model in Sweden contributes to a higher rate of homelessness, compared with Denmark and Norway where interventions rely on earlier obtaining 'permanent' contracts across different types of housing interventions. It is worth mentioning that Finland has followed a

normalising model where the main objective has been to acquire ordinary housing (Kärkkäinen, 1999). In the long term, Finland has seen a steady decrease in the homeless rate. However, Finland has not succeeded in reducing long term homelessness, which most frequently occurs among people with multiple social problems (Fredriksson, 2007).

## Differences in the housing system

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A starting point for this article was that homelessness and homeless policy should be understood and explained in the intersection between housing and social policy. We have showed that there are some differences in homelessness rates between Denmark, Norway and Sweden and that in spite of quite a few concurrent characteristics of the homeless strategies, the overall approaches to homeless interventions are in many respects different. Our contention is that one important explanation for these differences is found in the divergences in housing systems.

Bengtsson *et al.* (2006) classify the Nordic housing models primarily by types of occupancy of the dwellings. In a Nordic context, Norway is named as the social democratic homeowner nation (Annaniassen, 2006) with a rate of owner occupancy touching 80%. Publicly owned housing is about 4% of the housing stock. Jensen (2006) and Bengtsson (2006) emphasise the fact that owner-occupancy is the largest sector both in Denmark and Sweden compared with all types of occupancy in each country, representing 53% of the total housing stock in Denmark and 39% in Sweden. Contrary to Norway, Denmark and Sweden have high shares of public housing. In Denmark the public housing sector comprises approximately 20% of the total housing stock. Public housing (*allmännyttan*) in Sweden covers 22% of the housing stock.

Differences in homeless policies in the three countries cannot be explained by a simple dichotomy of on the one hand, the share of homeowners and, on the other hand, the share of public housing. As highlighted above, Denmark and Norway share quite a few commonalities in homeless policy while Sweden follows another path. Superficially the housing systems in Sweden and Denmark appear concurrent whereas Norway emerges as divergent. A closer look at the public housing sectors in Denmark and Sweden uncovers some profound divergences. Housing policy was reshaped during the 1990s, characterised by Bengtsson *et al.* (2006) as the winding-up phase, or the fourth<sup>5</sup> and until now last phase of the post World War II housing regimes. This phase has also been described by the term 'roll back of the state' in housing policy, however not in homelessness policy (Sahlin, 2004).

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<sup>5</sup> The three preceding phases comprise the introduction phase, establishment phase and management phase.

In Denmark the changes to, or rather liberalisation of the housing policy resulted in a strengthened position of public housing as an alternative for marginalised persons. Home ownership became a real alternative for ordinary people and the legitimacy of the publicly owned housing rests on the grounds that it is the only social housing tool of the local authorities (Jensen, 2006). Public housing is accessible for all through regular waiting lists administered by the public housing companies. Groups with specific needs may gain access to public housing and bypass regular waiting lists as there is a law enabling municipalities to refer people with special needs and problems to 25% of vacancies (33% in Copenhagen). To be eligible for this kind of 'municipal referral to public housing' a person has to meet certain criteria which are set locally. For the homeless this is an important means of access to public housing. However, locally there can be barriers which act against the re-housing of certain groups. For instance, in some cities and towns, the local practice is that active substance users are not referred to public housing, unless they receive treatment. This actually means that there may be mechanisms at play which *de facto* resemble the principles of the staircase model, if people cannot obtain secure housing due to substance use or other behavioural problems. Another barrier is that rents in newer public housing are often too high to be paid out of welfare benefits, reducing the supply of vacant housing that is accessible for vulnerable groups.

Bengtsson (2006) makes the observation that public housing in Sweden always has been meant for 'ordinary people' and not particularly for people with low income and social problems. However, in their capacity as non-profit organisations owned by the municipalities, the housing companies have to some extent accepted households and persons with social needs. In the wave of 1990s liberalisation these housing companies were given extended freedom to choose and reject applicants. Public subsidies of public housing were abolished, contributing to a reduction in, and even the repealing of their social responsibility. To gain access to housing for their clients, local social authorities were forced into a negotiation with the housing companies that resulted in the emergence of a secondary housing market in which local social authorities rent flats from the housing companies to sub-let to people with social problems, and frequently under conditions such as those following the 'staircase of transition' model (Sahlin, 1996, 1998; Löfstrand, 2005). Due to the imbalance of power between the social authorities and landlords, the latter are able to settle the terms of these contracts. A recent study shows that there is considerable variation among municipalities in the range and intensity of housing interventions available for vulnerable groups. Social contract housing (sub-lets) is the most widespread form of housing intervention in larger urban and suburban municipalities, whereas social support in housing is more widespread in smaller (rural) municipalities (Blid, 2008). This may reflect the higher pressure on the housing market in

larger cities which, combined with the absence of a municipal referral system to public housing, makes it more difficult for marginal groups to gain access to first-hand contracts in the larger cities. Another perspective is that second-hand social contracts replace a social housing policy aiming at assisting all people unable to obtain a home in the regular housing market (Runquist, 2007).

In Norway, preventing and counteracting homelessness take place in a system of home ownership where publicly owned social rented housing amounts to a very small proportion of the housing stock. There is tough competition for municipal housing, particularly in the city areas where the concentration of homeless persons is high (Hansen *et al.*, 2005). The responsibility for assisting homeless persons with housing is placed on the local social authorities, which will often negotiate with other municipal departments about access to the sparse stock of municipally owned social housing for their respective clients. A second vital characteristic of the housing market is a limited and volatile private rental market, which is a necessary although unreliable supplement to the municipally owned housing in covering the needs of homeless clients. Dyb *et al.* (2008) argue that lack of achievements regarding the objectives of the national homeless strategy, and even a back clash of achieved results, in the last year of the strategy period, is partly explained by a tightened housing market.

Summing up, the implementation of homeless policies in all three countries is a responsibility of the municipalities and assigned to the local social authorities. The housing systems play a significant part in shaping the national and even the local intervention solutions. As pinpointed in the Swedish evaluation (*Socialstyrelsen*, 2006b), the social authorities are more or less forced into asymmetric negotiations while attempting to access housing for their clients. However, the Norwegian example shows that the housing system is not a determinant force and that the authorities are not left without choices. *Project Homeless* was initially outlined following a strict staircase model, which is in accordance with certain drug treatment ideologies and thus appeared as a natural choice for the client group in question (Dyb, 2002). As mentioned, the national plan and largely the local implementation, switched to a 'normalising approach'. Also the 'staircase of transition' model could fit into the Norwegian homeowner regime, but would then have found its distinct shape and not turned into a blueprint of the Swedish model. Access to housing for the homeless and for persons with social problems within a large public housing stock, as seen in Denmark, is likely to promote a 'housing first' or 'normalising' approach.

## Conclusion

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The Scandinavian countries are often thought of as quite similar variations of the 'social/democratic' welfare state model. However, experiences from the three countries show that there are variations not only among, but also within the countries when it comes to levels of homelessness, policy responses and intervention strategies. A main distinction is between the 'housing first' and 'normalising-oriented' approaches found in Denmark and Norway and the widespread use of the staircase model in Sweden.

A large public housing stock is no guarantee of access to housing for the homeless and for persons unable to operate in the housing market on their own. As argued above, the structure of the housing sector is just as important as the extensiveness of public housing or the types of occupancy in general. Different characteristics of the housing system provide different structural conditions for the formation of policies and interventions towards homelessness. Further, access to housing for homeless and other groups with social needs is dependent on the general housing supply, availability of sufficient dwellings and house prices. The tight housing market in larger Scandinavian cities probably contributes to an upward trend of homelessness rates among the Scandinavian capitals; however, the trends are not unambiguous. Both Gothenburg in Sweden and Bergen in Norway outnumber their respective capitals in homelessness rates. In the case of Gothenburg this has been linked to an extensive application of second-hand tenancies and a differentiated staircase of transition (Sahlin, 2006). The differences between Oslo and Bergen may also be explained by local variations in homeless interventions (Dyb, 2004) and not primarily by different pressures in the housing market. Denmark has a more compact structure where Copenhagen represents the main urban area and the rest of the country is more or less defined as either district or province, which may offer an explanation for a substantially higher homeless rate in Copenhagen compared with other large Danish cities.

A premise for this article is that homelessness rates are adequate measures of the effectiveness of homeless policies. The national surveys are conducted to monitor both the statistics of homelessness and the characteristics of the homeless population as well as their changes over time. Thus the national rates are generally assessed as one of the most important measures of effectiveness in preventing and counteracting homelessness. We have seen that Sweden has the highest rates among the three countries with comparable figures.

There are some clear common trends in recent developments in national strategies as there is a common emphasis on targeting of services, flexible services and preventative efforts. A certain move towards the 'housing first' oriented approaches as seen in Denmark and Norway is observed in the Swedish national strategy document. The decentralised system of local government in the Scandinavian countries enables municipalities to develop local responses to homelessness, which raises the question of how to ensure that national policies of increasing and targeting services are anchored and implemented on a local level.

A significant problem, however, is a general shortage of housing. In an evaluation of an intervention programme for vulnerable groups in the six largest Danish cities, service providers in the capital often pointed to the lack of affordable social housing as a reinforcement of the homeless problem by extending stays in hostels or other institutions. Meanwhile, local actors in other larger towns stated that for those who were able to live on their own (eventually with social support) it was very easy to be referred to social housing (Benjaminsen, 2007). The shortage of housing is defined as the prime obstacle in the way of achieving the objectives of the Norwegian strategy against homelessness (Dyb *et al.*, 2008).

Despite these variations in intervention types, it is observed that no systematic randomised controlled trials have been carried out to shed light on differences in the effects of the varying intervention models in any of the Scandinavian countries. Similarities in definitions and methods of measurement of the homelessness rate, as well as national welfare institutions, combined with very divergent housing systems and both similarities and differences in homeless policies, offers an excellent trial case for comparative research on the effectiveness of homeless interventions.

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