Homelessness in a Scandinavian Welfare State. Experiences with Mainstreaming Housing First in the Danish Welfare System

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Disposition of presentation

- Trends of homelessness in Denmark
- Profiles and support needs
- Homelessness policies – experiences from the national homelessness strategy
- User survey in homeless shelters - what do shelter users prefer?
- Perspectives
Increase in homelessness 2009-2015 National (week) counts
Increase in homelessness in larger cities

- Other areas
- Aarhus
- Copenhagen suburbs
- Copenhagen
Increase in youth homelessness

- 18-24 year olds:
  - 85% increase
  - 2009: 633
  - 2015: 1,172

- 25-29 year olds:
  - 63% increase
  - 2009: 490
  - 2015: 799
Homelessness widely concentrated to people with complex support needs

- 80% have substance abuse problems and/or mental illness
- 32% have both

- 47% have mental illness (up from 37% in 2009)

- 65% have substance abuse problems
- 37% alcohol, 37% hashish, 19% hard drugs
## Profiles of shelter users in Denmark

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10 year period N = 25,326</th>
<th>Chronical (very long stays)</th>
<th>Episodical (many repeated stays)</th>
<th>Transitional (few and short stays)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of clients</td>
<td>16 %</td>
<td>7 %</td>
<td>77 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of client days</td>
<td>60 %</td>
<td>16 %</td>
<td>25 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average no. of episodes (stays)</td>
<td>4.6 stays</td>
<td>24.8 stays</td>
<td>2.2 stays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average no. of days</td>
<td>802 days</td>
<td>483 days</td>
<td>68 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average days per episode</td>
<td>175 days</td>
<td>20 days</td>
<td>32 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness (Pct.)</td>
<td>51 %</td>
<td>62 %</td>
<td>52 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse (alcohol or drugs) (Pct.)</td>
<td>73 %</td>
<td>95 %</td>
<td>74 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness or substance abuse (Pct.)</td>
<td>81 %</td>
<td>96 %</td>
<td>83 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness and Drugs (Pct.)</td>
<td>26 %</td>
<td>37 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Danish homelessness strategy 2009-2013

- 65 mill. € from central government
- Housing First as overall principle
- Test whether Housing First works in a Danish context
- Develop and test evidence based floating support methods - Assertive Community Treatment, Intensive Case Management, Critical Time Intervention
- 17 municipalities (out of 98) participated in the 2009-2013 programme
- 25 municipalities in follow-up programme 2014-2016
Housing for the Housing First programme

- Public housing is 21% of housing stock (½ million units in a population of 5.7 million)
- Public housing open for everybody regardless of income (general waiting lists)
- Municipalities have a right to use 25% vacancies for people in acute housing need
- Public housing and the prioritised allocation system for the most vulnerable groups is a major explanation why the overall level of homelessness in Denmark is relatively low
- The priority access system can be seen as an institutionalised mechanism to allocate housing for Housing First programmes in municipalities
Housing First also works in Denmark

- Housing First works for most homeless people – 9 out of 10 who were housed in the programme maintained their housing (no control groups – no RCT)

- People whom we never thought could have been housed were housed and we cannot predict in advance who will fail

- Better experiences with independent scattered housing than with congregate housing
Challenges and barriers

• The mindshift to Housing First needs to be facilitated at many levels (service providers, shelters, municipalities, substance abuse treatment services etc.)
• Housing First is still debated – a continued struggle between different approaches
• Organisational structures needs to be adapted and integrated to facilitate Housing First
• Barriers for scaling up the intensive evidence-based floating support methods
• General shortage of affordable housing and public housing
• Social mix policies excluding socially vulnerable groups from housing
• Reduced welfare benefits for young people and other groups
Paradoxical results?

- Can a homelessness programme be regarded as successful when homelessness increases?
- Caution not to confuse results on individual and aggregate level
- Housing First works but cannot solve the housing affordability crisis or counteract consequences of welfare benefit reforms
- Negative/unintended consequences of general welfare reforms and housing policies are not sufficiently taken into account in the formation and rhetoric about homelessness programmes
- Decoupling of homelessness policies from general housing and welfare policies?
Housing preferences of shelter users (User survey in homeless shelters, 2015)

- 90 % would generally like to live in ‘own housing’ (n= 179)

Specific preferences (multiple answers possible)
- 72 % prefer a flat in ordinary housing
- 8 % prefer a flat in congregate housing
- 7 % prefer ‘skæve huse’ (alternative housing)
- 3 % prefer a place in a nursing home
- 8 % prefer to stay in the shelter
- 5 % prefer to stay in another shelter
- And 24 % stated various other places in open categories such as ‘My own house’, ‘The countryside’ etc…. 
User survey in homeless shelters

- 68 % has previously experienced an eviction
- (22 % multiple times)

- 60 % received *no* support the last time they were living in own housing
- 9 % received support for less than half a year
- 28 % received support for more than half a year
Perpectives/recommendations

- Continue efforts of mainstreaming Housing First into municipal social services
- Scale up evidence based floating support methods – ACT and ICM
- Increase supply of affordable public housing
- Increase targeted welfare/housing benefits for people with complex support needs
- Adjust social mix policies not to disfavorise vulnerable people in access to housing
Thanks for the attention

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