

Summary – Nordic Homeless Monitor

Homelessness is increasing in Denmark, especially among young adults

The number of people who experience homelessness is on the rise in Denmark. The National Homeless Surveys show that 1,600 more people are homeless in Denmark today compared to 2009. This is an increase of 33 pct. Solely among young adults in the age group 18-29 years, the number has increased by almost 1,200 people. Thus, there are twice as many homeless young adults today as eight years ago.

A worrying development that stands in contrast to political goals

It is a disturbing development that stands in sharp contrasts to the goals set in several political homeless strategies in the same period. In 2009, the government launched the “Homeless Strategy” – a national plan for reducing homelessness in Denmark, with a total of 17 municipalities and 500 million kr. in funding. The project has been followed by several new national initiatives focusing on developing the learnings from the “Homeless Strategy” and implementing them in more municipalities around the country.

Is Denmark doing the right thing?

With such a significant increase in homelessness - despite of several national strategies with the exact opposite purpose - it is only natural to propose the question: Is Denmark doing the right thing? Are the other Nordic countries facing the same negative development, and if not – what can Denmark learn from their approaches and experiences?

The purpose of the report

The purpose of this report is to compare homelessness in Denmark with the rest of the Nordic countries, and on this basis provide recommendations for Denmark’s work with homelessness in the future. The comparison is based on data collected as part of the Homeless Monitor which presents ten key indicators for homelessness across Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland. The recommendations are on the Homeless Monitor, interviews with leading experts from the Nordic countries and a literature review of the leading research on the field.

Results from the Homeless Monitor

The Homeless Monitor illustrates the development of homelessness in the Nordic countries across a range of relevant factors, such as the type of homelessness, age groups, the frequency of psychological and physical diseases and national origin.

The picture painted of Denmark in the Homeless Monitor is far from a fairy tale, in several areas Denmark is lagging behind the other Nordic countries.

More homeless people in Denmark – fewer in Norway and Finland

Contrary to the development in Denmark and Sweden, the number of homeless people are going down in Norway and Finland. In Denmark, the share of homeless people has increased by 27 pct. since 2009, while it in Norway and Finland has fallen respectively 36 and 13 per cent since 2006 and 2005.

More young adults become homeless in Denmark

Denmark has by far experienced the largest increase in homelessness among young adults. The share of homeless young adults has increased from 150 to 263 for every 100,000-young adult from 2009-2017. This means that every third homeless person in Denmark is now between 18-29 years old. Norway has almost half as many homeless young adults, with only 135 homeless young adults for every 100,000-young adults in 2017.

Denmark and Sweden have the highest number of people in long-term homelessness

The duration of homelessness is considerably longer in both Denmark and Sweden than in Norway. In Norway homelessness lasts seven months or more (i.e. long-term homelessness) for 41 per cent of all homeless people. The corresponding shares in Denmark and Sweden are respectively 67 and 76 per cent.

Denmark has a high number of rough sleepers

With 10 pct. of the homeless population being rough sleepers, Denmark has the second highest share of rough sleepers among the Nordic countries. Only Finland has a marginally higher share of rough sleepers – 11 pct. It is important to note that Finland has reduced the number of rough sleepers significantly since 2005 where the share of rough sleepers of the homeless population was 21 pct.

High percentage of homeless people with mental health issues in Denmark

More than 50 pct. of the homeless population in Denmark has a mental illness. In comparison around a third of the homeless population in Sweden and Norway has a mental illness. Thus, mental illnesses are considerably more widespread in the Danish homeless population.

Conclusions from the literature review

Successful interventions provide stable housing solutions

In accordance with the literature in the field, the success of the homelessness interventions in this report is estimated on to which extent the interventions have been able to create a stable housing solution for the homeless participants, cf. Stergiopoulos et al. (2015a), Aubry et al. (2015a and 2015b) and Tsemberis et al. (2004). By a stable housing solution, it is understood that the homeless is able to maintain the allocated housing for a longer period of time, for example one or two years. Since many homeless people have social issues, mental illnesses or substance abuse problems, it is insufficient to allocate housing without proper social support, if the homeless are to maintain a stable housing situation.

Research points to known interventions with documented impact

A comprehensive analysis of the leading and the latest evidence-based homelessness research shows that there are effective interventions targeting homelessness, that are internationally recognized. The most effective response to homelessness is Housing First. Housing First is characterized by beginning with creating a stable housing solution for the homeless combined with thorough social support. Compared to traditional approaches to homelessness, homeless people who receive Housing First treatment receive housing faster and manage to a higher degree to maintain housing.

ACT shows good results

The case management model Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) has proven to be particularly effective for homeless people with mental illnesses, (Denmark has a high share of homeless people with mental illnesses). The ACT case management model is targeted people with complex support needs, where the existing support system has proven to be insufficient. The homeless people receive intensive support from an interdisciplinary team consisting of pedagogues, psychiatrists, substance abuse counselors, nurses and social workers.

Two other effective case management models are Intensive Case Management (ICM) and Critical Time Intervention (CTI). The ICM model is a prolonged intervention, where each individual is being treated according to their needs. The CTI model is a shorter intervention and is oriented towards people in transitional phases.

Denmark has had a Housing First approach since 2009

The Housing First approach was implemented in Denmark through the national Homeless Strategy, that ran from 2009-2013. Based on the experiences from the Homeless Strategy several national programs have supported the implementation of the Housing First approach in Danish municipalities. 24 participating municipalities were to implement the Housing First approach combined with at least one of the case management programs: ACT, ICM or CTI.

A lack of RCT evaluations

None of the Danish Housing First initiatives have been evaluated based on randomized controlled trials (RCT). The evaluations conducted on the Danish Housing First initiatives does however point to a reduced level of homelessness, and thereby indicating that Housing First initiatives are likely to be effective in Denmark. In order to determine whether Housing First and the case management programs are effective or whether modifications are needed, interventions with RCT must be conducted in Denmark.

Experiences from the other Nordic countries

A lack of housing is the greatest barrier to implement Housing First

In Denmark, the greatest challenge to implementing Housing First - both during the Homeless Strategy and the following national programs - has been a significant lack of affordable housing. Evaluations indicate that municipalities have not been able to properly implement a Housing First approach because of the shortage of affordable housing. The challenge with affordable housing has been particularly prominent for homeless young adults because of their limited financial capacity.

Norway has addressed the housing problem

In Norway, a long-term approach and a focus on combining social politics with housing politics has been key to addressing the housing challenge. In 2000, Norway was the first Nordic country to implement a Housing First approach to homelessness and has since worked continuously for ensuring that homeless people receive permanent housing followed by thorough social support.

Finland converts shelters to permanent housing

Like Norway, Finland has for several years prioritized homelessness in the political agenda. From 2008 to 2015 two national homeless programs have been implemented in 10 municipalities covering a total of 85 per cent of the homeless population in Finland. By comparison, the initial Danish Homeless Strategy was implemented in eight municipalities including around 50 per cent. of the Danish homeless population. One of the Finnish initiatives has been the conversion of a large number of shelters in Helsinki to permanent housing with private bedrooms and shared kitchen facilities. To ensure that the former homeless people maintained a stable housing situation, there is a high level of staffing in order to accommodate the residents' needs for support. Due to this initiative the number of homeless people and in particular rough sleepers has gone down significantly in recent years in Finland.

Sweden lacks a focused homeless strategy

Among the Nordic countries Sweden has had the least focused homeless strategy. The Swedish homeless initiatives consist partly of a smaller two-year project and by identifying the core of the homeless problem. However, none of the identified issues and solutions were since implemented. In comparison Denmark, Norway and Finland have had focused homeless projects of at least eight years running. Furthermore, Sweden's approach to homelessness is still based on Treatment First instead of the evidence-based Housing First approach.

Recommendations for homeless initiatives in Denmark

Based on the Homeless Monitor, the literature review and interviews with Nordic homelessness-experts, three recommendations are presented for Denmark's further work with homelessness.

1. Extend the use of ACT case management and follow up with impact evaluations
Out of the three Housing First case management models ACT has the most documented effect on a permanent reduction in homelessness. Evidence is based on foreign studies, but Danish evaluations suggest that this is also the case in Denmark.
2. Analyze expenses and savings associated with Housing First initiatives
The three Housing First case management models are costly, but research indicates that the initiatives lead to significant savings. For example, homeless people who have been offered permanent housing with case management will no longer be part of the very costly shelter-system. And further, if providing permanent housing and case management reduces crime or has positive health effects - which research points to - there may be additional savings for the public sector.

Therefore, the report recommends an analysis of the actual costs of Housing First over a long time-period, considering the variety of public savings in other areas of expenditure. A mapping of the distribution of expenses and savings will show what the actual costs of Housing First are and where the subsequent savings will be.

3. Implement a national housing policy focused on providing affordable housing

The main challenge with implementing Housing First in Denmark has been - and still is - a lack of affordable housing for homeless people.

Therefore, the report recommends that the state and the municipalities formulate a common national housing strategy focusing on providing affordable housing for homeless people, thereby enabling the further implementation of Housing First in the communes where the homeless people live.

About the Home for All Alliance

The Home for All Alliance is an NGO representing 14 partners from the public- and private sector, the civil society and the housing sector. The Alliance is managed by a board of directors representing 7 of the leading partners and the daily business is run by a backbone secretariat. The Home for All Alliance work with +50 organizations on social innovation projects focusing on providing permanent housing, strengthening the young adults social networks and offering a solid and integrated social support. The Alliance works for more and better collaboration across sectors in order to provide new and holistic solutions towards ending homelessness among young adults.

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