

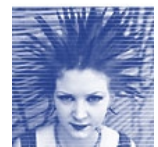


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Lars Pico Geerdsen, Inger Koch-Nielsen, Henrik Vinther, Ivan Christensen, Vibeke Tornhøj Christensen

Preventing and Tackling Homelessness

Homeless People – Five Years after a Stay in a Residential Institution



on behalf of

 European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





Homelessness is a complex phenomenon, often tying in with a wide range of problems besides the mere lack of a home. Misuse, mental illness, violence in couples relationship or other threats of violence, poor labour market attachment, crime, insufficient social networks and rootlessness are some of the problem areas often present when people are homeless. As a result, there is no consensus on a straightforward definition.

This report deals with people who at some time in their lives have experienced social and housing problems at a level that forced them to approach a residential institution or a family treatment centre. Specifically, the report concerns previous residents of various types of homeless institutions¹ in 1997. This category of institutions comprises residential institutions and shelters, sheltered boarding houses and institutions for mixed purposes. The category also includes the family treatment centres catering for parents with such social problems as a violent spouse.²

The survey is based on institutions in the City of Copenhagen, the counties of Aarhus, Nordjylland, Ringkøbing, Ribe and Funen. A total of 36 institutions, 7 of them family treatment centres, participated in the survey. About 4,500 people stayed at the institutions in 1997, 650 of them in family treatment centres. The ratio of men to women in the group is 1:3, and almost all the men stayed in residential institutions or similar, while this was the case with only about 50% of the women. These 4,500 people make up the survey *gross population*.

About 3,000 of the gross population could be traced in 2004. The remaining people were inaccessible to us, because they were dead, were shielded from research, had emigrated, were imprisoned, etc. These 3,000 people comprise the survey net population. From the net population we have extracted a sample of 1,600 research subjects, whom we tried to interview. We succeeded in interviewing 842 of the subjects. To a wide extent, the report is based on these 842 subjects. Unless another method is mentioned, the following results are based on analyses of the 842 former users interviewed.

The people contacting institutions for the homeless do not constitute a representative sample of the population. Seventeen percent are immigrants or their

1 Section 105 institutions, now section 94 institutions.

2 It is debatable whether such institutions fall under the usual perception of institutions for homeless, but since they cater for people who are unable or unwilling to live in their own home or who have no homes at all, they have been included in this report on an equal footing with the other institutions.



descendants³, and the proportion is especially high among the women (25%). In general, this is a group of people whose lives in many respects qualify them to be labelled socially excluded. First of all, 1% of the net population has attempted suicide within the last year. This only applies to 0.08% of the general population. Secondly, they figure prominently in the crime statistics measured by such factors as number of prison sentences. In the period 1980–2002 more than 40% of the group were sentenced to prison compared to about 3% of the general population. In addition, the group has a relatively high number of social assistance claimants. Forty percent claimed social assistance in 2001 compared to only 4% of the entire population, but only 25% of the group are rated as fit to work.

The survey aims to elucidate and answer the following questions:

- How many of the previous users of institutions for homeless people have achieved better and more stable lives (are no longer homeless) at the time of the interview in 2004?
- What characterises the people who have experienced a positive development and those who have not?
- What can explain the differing trends when contact to various public bodies is considered?

How many research subjects can be described as having achieved better and more stable lives?

We have studied the previous users' life situations after 1997 in a variety of dimensions, such as housing situation, network, financial deprivation, labour market attachment, health, etc. The objective is to reveal whether previous users have achieved generally better and more stable lives since their institutional stays in 1997. In the following we will describe the results in three dimensions: housing conditions, living conditions and networks.

Housing conditions

A surprisingly large group of the previous users have found a home. Out of the gross population, 56% of the subjects are registered as having their own homes in 2004. Almost 80% of the respondents lived in their own homes in 2004 -

3 The high share of immigrants arises because the City of Copenhagen is included in the survey.



with the previous users of family treatment institutions having been most successful. The homes are relatively small and relatively poor in some respects, but the residents are satisfied and perceive their housing as homes.

When it came to stability of the housing situation, the picture was less consistent. Twenty-five percent had lived in their homes for less than 2 years, and 40% had lived there for more than five years. The differences are further emphasised by the fact that 17% of the previous users have been veritably street homeless in the last five years, while 25% have experienced "hidden homelessness" i.e. having had to stay with families, friends or in subleased homes. In total, 60% have experienced some type of homelessness within the last five years. Experience with homelessness is especially prevalent among previous users of residential institutions and shelters. However, users of family treatment institutions are also familiar with hidden homelessness.

Living conditions

Financial conditions are not always optimum. Less than 20% of the residential institution users had jobs at the time of the interview. The basis of income is either anticipatory pension (50%) or daily cash benefits/social assistance (20%). The situation improves for the previous users of family treatment institutions, where 45% have jobs and only 8% claim anticipatory pension or social assistance.

On this backdrop, we would expect the previous users of family treatment centres also to have better living standards. But this proves to be false. In this report, living standards have been measured in relation to deprivations in daily life, i.e. whether finances prevent the subjects from purchasing a range of daily necessities or performing a variety of social activities. First of all, it can be established that the previous users are generally much worse off than the rest of the population, with 72% suffering deprivation compared to 31% of the general population. But this is only true for 20% of users of the family treatment institutions. A picture thus emerges of a group of women who may have attained their own homes but lead difficult daily lives. This is especially true of single parents.

Networks

In the group of previous users, many men live alone (73%) without partners or children, whereas the women are single parents (37%) or live with a partner



(35%). Danes live alone much more often than immigrants and their descendants. One explanation lies in the fact that, one year later, 40% of the immigrant women from family treatment institutions (according to gross population analyses) had moved in with a partner, new or old, while this was only true for 10% of the Danish women. Living in couples relationships does not necessarily signal improved conditions. This is certainly not the case if the women have returned to a violent partner.

In general, many of the previous users turn out to have some type of network. Although many of them have families, their contact with family is nonetheless limited. This is especially true for the men and for immigrants and their descendants. The vast majority of them have friends and have been in recent contact with them. Considering how many of them are single and without family networks, it is not surprising that a relatively large number of them also feel undesirably alone, i.e. 17% against only 4% of the entire population.

What characterises the people who have experienced positive development and those who have not?

Factors promoting positive development tie in with the above three dimensions, i.e. housing conditions, living conditions and networks.

Housing situation

In terms of achieving conventional housing situations, women with children have especially good chances of leaving homelessness, presumably because local authorities feel obligated to procure homes for families with children. This result is reflected in both the gross population and in the group of respondents. The chances of acquiring a home also improve, if the person has completed a higher education. In contrast, labour market attachment does not play any significant role. This is probably because the various transfer payments and housing benefit schemes were set up to enable people to stay in their homes despite unemployment or retirement. Ethnic background has no impact on the group of respondents, but in the gross population we can see that immigrants are less likely to acquire homes of their own, while their descendants are no different from Danes.

We presumed that the previous users who stayed for long periods at an institution in 1997 would be more adversely affected and thus find it more difficult



to find homes. However, this is not so. We cannot establish any interrelation between the duration of a stay in an institution and the probability of finding a home. Nor does it seem to matter whether a person has stayed in a residential or a family treatment institution. A person's gender is the decisive factor.

The previous users were asked to explain why they applied for a stay in an institution. Twelve percent of them cite debt to public authorities as a reason. Only a relatively small part of this group has found a home in the period since 1997. We do not know the types of debt involved. They could be fines, tax debts, child maintenance and possibly also rent arrears, even though they would be owed to a housing association and not to a public authority. In all circumstances, this factor seems to work as a powerful obstacle to the process of leaving homelessness.

Living conditions

When it comes to achieving a reasonable living standard, we can see that the above factors have the opposite effect. In relation to living standard, being a single parent or having many children is a negative factor, while being in a couples relationship can improve people's financial standing. Thus, people who are now living with a partner or a spouse are doing significantly better than people living alone with or without children. In this context, labour market attachment appears to play a positive role, and analyses of the gross population also show that the probability of being on the labour market is high for people living in relationships and low for single mothers. The significance of being on the labour market also becomes apparent in the fact that social assistance or cash benefits have an extremely negative impact, as all of 60% of the claimants suffer more than five deprivations versus 33% of the previous users as a whole. In this context, debt to public authorities also constitutes a powerful barrier.

The survey shows that aspects such as gender, ethnic background, how people live now (i.e. in or not in own homes), education and length of institutional stay in 1997 do not impact on the previous users' living standard levels. As mentioned, living in relationships and being on the labour market are key factors.

Networks

In relation to networks, we identified children as a major plus in preventing people from feeling lonely. Surprisingly, this is also true if alcohol misuse once



helped prompt people to apply for a stay in an institution. Many factors boost the feeling of loneliness, especially the interrelation with deprivation in daily life. Presumably this should be seen in the context of the increased risk of isolation inherent in being unable to afford to invite guests home, go out or go on holidays. Drug misuse, violence and disease also aggravate loneliness.

What explains the differing developments?

Denmark seeks to counter and combat homelessness at various levels. One level is our general social and housing policy aimed at giving everybody the opportunity to live in his own home, even though he, for instance, loses his job, gets divorced, becomes ill, etc. This survey was not designed to elucidate these general policies, but their importance becomes apparent when we note that labour market attachment has no obvious impact on whether people attain their own homes after a period of homelessness. In contrast, broken couples relationships are a major cause of homelessness. We have also shown that debt to public authorities is a powerful obstacle to leaving homelessness. This fact implies that the actions of public authorities also have a number of unintentional negative consequences.

However, there is a range of specific targeted efforts aimed at helping homeless people. We asked the previous users whether they had had contact with a long list of activities involving housing and network-creation, and how they assessed the importance of these activities.

As to activities related to housing matters, the respondents were asked whether they had been in contact with:

- housing agencies
- a social housing worker
- a residential advisor
- shared housing arrangement
- transition housing or similar
- home-help services

Housing agency contact is the only activity with which a major group of 44% have been in contact. Other activities have only been relevant for a minor group composed particularly of the most socially marginalised previous users (i.e. those now living in special housing arrangements). The only activity for which we can identify a positive co-variation between the activity and attainment of own home is a residential advisor.



As to network-creating activities, the previous users were asked:

- whether they had found friends among the staff of an institution
- whether they had a support and contact person
- whether they have had contact to an employee at a residential institution after having left the institution
- whether they attend or have attended a shelter café or shelter

Previous users from family treatment institutions and residential institutions/shelters differ greatly in this respect. The latter group has reaped the most benefit from the network-creating activities.

We have been unable to identify a positive connection between the activities and the scope of the previous users' networks. Actually, the feeling of loneliness is more widespread among the people assigned to a contact person than among those who have had none. However, this could solely be because the activities primarily target the most socially marginalised people. In general, our results show that a very large majority (80%) of the people in contact with an activity believe that it helped them.

As to employment-related activities, the respondents were asked about action plans, prepared for one third of them, rehabilitation, tried by one fourth of them, and job-activation, tried by slightly more than one third of them. Generally, we have been unable to establish any interrelations between activities and living conditions. Again, the lacking statistical interrelation is probably attributable to the activities being mainly targeted at the weakest, which makes it difficult to identify improvements when we compare participants with non-participant users. Slightly less than half the respondents participating in activities believe that they worked.

The most socially marginalised groups

It is a well-known fact that homeless people, including users of homeless institutions, are often subjected to other social problems such as misuse and mental illness. We have tried to measure these facts through a range of questions on reasons for homelessness and contact to various treatment institutions. Finally, we have extracted data from Denmark's National Patient Discharge Registry.



On the basis of this data we can establish that close to 40% of the interviewed previous users have at some time in their lives been affected by mental illness. This is especially true about ethnical Danes aged 40 + . The question is whether they are much worse off than people without mental problems. Their housing careers are no less stable than those of the other respondents, but they were less likely to live in their own home at the interview date. There are more single women in the group and fewer with resident children. In contrast, their living standards as measured in the number of daily deprivations are no worse than those of the other previous users.

Slightly more than 50% of the previous users have had alcohol problems at some time in their lives. This group primarily consists of men who stayed in a residential institution in 1997. Many of them are people of Danish origin, aged 40 + , and relatively often divorced. Few of them have resident children. More than 50% of them claim anticipatory pension, and a large number of them have criminal records. At the interview date, their housing situation is no different than that of people unaffected by alcohol problems. And the men have even suffered fewer financial deprivations than other previous users. Female alcohol misusers more often live alone and more rarely with children than the other women. When it comes to social networks and living standards, they are no worse off than the other respondents, and they are not lonelier.

The survey clearly shows that people suffering drug problems at some time in their lives are in the worst situations. This applies to more than every fifth respondent. They are largely all Danes who stayed in a residential institution or similar in 1997. In contrast to the other most marginalised groups, this group contains a large proportion of women (20%). They are also relatively young, almost half being aged between 30 and 39. They are as likely to be living with a partner as the other previous users, but few have resident children. They have relatively low levels of education, and few had jobs as of the interview date in 2004. Every fifth person in this group mentioned debt to public authorities as one reason why they then stayed at a homelessness institution (compared to 12% of all previous users). They had more stays in institutions for homeless in 1997 than the other users, and they very often have long criminal records. As to their current housing situation, drug misusers are no different from other previous users, nor have they stayed in their current homes for shorter periods. On that background, it seems surprising that more than one third of them have lived on the streets some time in the last five years, and more than



half of them have stayed in a residential institution or similar. Drug misusers feel lonely more often than the other respondents, and they experience significantly more financial deprivations.

In total, 75% of the respondents have at some time in their lives either experienced drugs or alcohol problems or have suffered mental illness.

Unsurprisingly, users of institutions for homeless form a very socially marginalised group. Still, 56% of the gross population and 80% of the respondents have attained their own homes after their stay at an institution. Perhaps, the general welfare services make this possible. But this group's standard of living is relatively poor. This is especially true about single mothers. We see no immediate evidence to indicate that users participating in various targeted activities do better than those not participating. However, this interrelation is probably attributable to the fact that the activities specifically target the most socially disadvantaged. The people participating in the activities may well have experienced improvements in their living conditions that we have been unable to identify in this report.