

# Counting the homeless – improving the basis for planning assistance

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## 1. Experiences with counting the homeless

### 1.1 The Norwegian definition on homelessness

The Norwegian definition of homelessness would fit into parts of the ETHOS definition. The Norwegian definition is as follows: The person lacks shelter for the coming night, the person has been referred to emergency or temporary accommodation, the person is in prison or an institution and is going to be released/discharged within two months and does not have a place of residence upon release/discharge, the person is temporarily living with friends, acquaintances or relatives. A new definition of homelessness and disadvantaged in the housing market is being worked on. This definition will concur with the ETHOS definition to a greater degree than the current definition of homelessness.

### 1.2 On studies on homelessness

White Paper No. 50 to Parliament (1998-99) *The Equalisation Report* highlighted homelessness as a major challenge in housing policy. It raised many of the challenges associated with homelessness and systematised them with other challenges the governments faced in the health and social sector. This work subsequently resulted in the establishment of a national project, "Project Homelessness" (2000-2004), in which seven of the largest cities and two non-governmental organisations participated. The aim of the project was to develop models for preventing and combating homelessness, test out alternative housing and follow-up measures, exchange experience and knowledge, and create a basis for a national strategy on combating homelessness. The national strategy to combat and prevent homelessness (2005-2007) was subsequently established. The job of preventing and combating homelessness is now embedded as an integral part of the continuous social housing work in the Norwegian State Housing Bank (Husbanken).

The Ministry's ambition is to survey homelessness every second year. The Norwegian State Housing Bank announces the study and selects a research institute, based on the rules regulating public procurement, on behalf of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. The results from the studies are used to formulate policy in the area, including prioritising the funding proposed in connection with the annual national budgets.

### 1.3 Have studies led to a change of strategy?

The results from the first study in 1996 led to homelessness becoming a theme in White Paper No. 50 *The Equalisation Report*. In turn the work on this white paper resulted in the establishment of the national project "Project Homelessness", which ran from 2000 to 2004. Upon the conclusion of this project a national strategy, "The pathway to a permanent home", which ran from 2005 to 2007, took over. Upon the conclusion of the strategy it was decided that the work on preventing and combating homeless should form an integral part of the social housing work in the Norwegian State Housing Bank. It was further decided that the Norwegian State Housing Bank would prioritise this work.

The studies have helped to make the homeless visible as a group in both specialist environments and also in the political debates taking place nationally and locally in local authorities. It has also helped to make the various additional problems the homeless are struggling with visible. Among other things it has helped to change the view that the only problem the homeless are struggling with is poor personal financial situations. The researchers behind the studies have also claimed that the studies have helped to make homelessness visible to people in the social services, not least in small local authorities.

In the opinion of the Ministry a study cannot on its own lead to a reduction in the number of homeless people. Nonetheless, the systematic studies over time are a crucial tool in the work of preventing and combating homelessness. The studies provide a nuanced picture of this group that would otherwise be very difficult to obtain due to limited registration of the group. For example, what the dominant additional problems are, nationalities, ages and where they are living. This is important information for the national government and local authorities to have in order to initiate relevant measures for the group. It is, not least, important if one wants to engage various aspects of the social services such as, for example, the health sector and supervisory sector.

The studies also enable developments and changes to be monitored over time. This is also important when it comes to being able to assess the effects of initiated measures, etc. The Ministry has set work goals and result goals for the work in the annual national budgets. For example, from the most recent study one can see that the number of young people under the age of 24 has increased and this will therefore be the group the Ministry wants the Norwegian State Housing Bank to afford greater focus to in the work on homelessness in 2010.

### 1.4 On data collection

The first three studies (1996, 2003 and 2005) did not ask as many background questions as the 2008 study. For example, the 2008 study asked about debt, loss of income and situations associated with eviction/loss of housing. This new information has provided a more nuanced picture of the housing history of homeless people. Learning even more about the housing history of homeless people might be appropriate. This could provide us with a picture of the movements of the homeless and possibly a better basis for initiating measures with respect to both physical housing and the supervision services necessary to better prevent homelessness. On the other hand, this is difficult to do unless one asks each individual, which is not what the Norwegian studies are based on.

## 2. Strategies, planning, evaluation

### 2.1 Developing the strategy, the goals and primary actors

In the period 2005-2007 Norway had a national strategy for preventing and combating homelessness, "The pathway to a permanent home". Five ministries were involved in the formulation, content and structure of the strategy. The Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development was responsible for it and therefore played a leadership role and had coordinating responsibility for the work. The other ministries were the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, Ministry of Children and Equality, Ministry of Health and Care Services and Ministry of Justice. Responsibility for implementing the strategy and the work was primarily assigned to the Norwegian State Housing Bank.

The strategy involved five concrete national result goals:

- Number of eviction petitions shall be reduced by 50 per cent and the number of evictions by 30 per cent.
- No one shall have to spend time in temporary housing upon release from prison.
- No one shall have to seek temporary housing upon discharge from an institution.
- No one shall be offered overnight shelters without a quality agreement.
- No one shall stay more than three months in temporary housing.

The local authorities were the primary actors in the work on achieving the strategy's goals while the Norwegian State Housing Bank, as the government's coordinator, was the body that administered most of the funding. The local authorities could apply for various funding from the Norwegian State Housing Bank such as competence grants, housing grants, housing benefit and start loans. The local authorities could also apply for funds related to supervisory services in housing for the homeless and substance abusers. This scheme is administered by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organisation (NAV).

### 2.2 The European Parliaments declaration to street homelessness by 2015

Since Norway is not a member state of the EU this declaration will not have much effect on the work being done at a local level. What will have more effect on the work on homelessness, both at a local and a national level, is the fact that in its political platform for the next four years the government has declared that it will work to intensify the work on homelessness by increasing the rental housing available to local authorities and housing with supervisory services.

### 2.3 Evaluation of the strategy and what could we have done differently?

The strategy was evaluated in 2008. According to this evaluation the strategy's goals were not achieved. Eviction petitions were reduced by 22 per cent and the number of implemented evictions by 15 per cent during the strategy period. The other result goals were very general and it was therefore more difficult to measure the attainment of these. On the other hand, what has been very useful is that the result goals in the strategy have turned the spotlight on the various challenges faced in relation to the target groups. For example, poor routines and cooperation

between prisons and the social services in the local authorities, which, among other things, has resulted in more than 80 cooperation agreements between these bodies.

Some socio-economic factors that can be assumed to have made a positive contribution to the implementation of the strategy are a period of strong economic expansion with low interest rates and low levels of unemployment combined with small cohorts entering education, the job market and the housing market.

More structural factors were identified as probably effecting the attainment of the goals during the evaluation of the strategy. For example, the housing sector is dominated by owned homes, a small rental market for this group, and a limited local authority owned housing sector. Prices in the rental market were relatively low at the start of the strategy, but during 2007 rents rose and it became difficult to obtain housing in some places. Other factors that were highlighted in the evaluation were the fact that some funding means such as start loans and housing benefit were means that were poorly suited to the strategy's target group. In April 2009, the Storting (Norwegian parliament) passed a new housing benefit scheme which involves comprehensive increases in the grants, several new groups now being covered by the scheme, and increased income thresholds. This makes an important contribution to the job of procuring housing for this group, and single men in particular will now be able to receive housing benefit.

The evaluation also points out that the most important barrier to attaining the goals is a lack of adapted or modified housing. For its part, the Ministry believes that this must be seen in the context of the demanding job it is to ensure good follow-up to ensure mastering in the housing situation. This dimension was not adequately assessed in the evaluation.

*What could we have done differently?*

More concrete and realistic goal formulations for the work. The eviction result goals were the only ones that were directly measurable. Numbers and reporting via KOSTRA<sup>1</sup> are currently not suitable for assessing concrete goal attainment.

Enabling local authorities to sustain their commitment and activities during a phase in which many other welfare tasks must be prioritised locally, including focusing on housing for people who need 24-hour nursing and care, is demanding for the government. This made great demands vis-à-vis information during the transition from a strategy period to a permanent effort in this area.

The development of measures and projects in the work on preventing and combating homelessness has been and will be supported. Support has been provided to start activities in local authorities or in organisations that are working in this area. However, a number of challenges have arisen in the transition from a period of government support to the projects being self-financed. This has resulted in good projects having faced challenges vis-à-vis self-financing, which entails being integrated into the ordinary activities within their own operations. In the Norwegian State Housing Bank's future focus on social housing development plans the focus will be on the most hard up local authorities. The right embedding and the local authorities' own efforts will be important elements in ensuring good implementation in the local authority system.

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<sup>1</sup> KOSTRA = Municipal-State-Reporting, which is a national information system that provides control information about local authority activities.

## Literature

Dyb, E. & K. Johannessen (2009): Bostedsløshet i Norge 2008 – en kartlegging. NIBR- rapport 2009:17

## Annex 1: Facts about Norway

There are 4, 8 million inhabitants in Norway. About 1,1 million live in the four largest cities (Oslo – 580 000, Bergen – 253 000, Trondheim – 168 000 and Stavanger 122 000).

Norway is made of many and small sized municipalities. There are total of 430 municipalities in Norway and the average size is 11 000 inhabitants. The municipalities are self-governed which in theory means that there are 430 ways to do things which are not obliged by law.

### The housing policy in Norway – who does what!

The Ministry of Local Government and Regional development is responsible for matters relating to housing and building policy. The Norwegian State Housing Bank is the subordinate agency and is responsible for implementing Norwegian housing policy, including preventing and combating homelessness.

The national government sets goals, proposes housing laws and regulations and provides funds for loans, grants and housing allowances through the Housing bank. The Housing Bank is therefore a very important partner in this work. The Housing Bank's main focus is to assist and support the municipalities in their work to combat homelessness. This is priority number one for the Housing Bank.

The municipal authorities are responsible for planning the local housing structure as well as necessary infrastructure for housing construction. Municipal authorities have a key role in the work on homelessness because they are - according to the Social Security Act - responsible for ensuring that disadvantaged groups, including the homeless, are provided with adequate housing.

Last but not least: The civil society, NGOs and CBOs are very important partners for the authorities. With their experience and ideas – and also recourses - they push the agenda forward, are agents for change – and are also, many of them, doing important work in the field.

### Statistics

One of the main goals for Norwegian housing policies has been that everyone should be able to own their own home. According to the statistics, 76 per cent of Norwegians do. The public renting sector is modest. Only about 19 per cent all together rent their home. And what we may call “the social housing market” – rental housing owned by the municipalities - only covers about 4 per cent of the total housing market in Norway.

### Housing allowances, loans and grants from the Housing bank

#### *Housing allowances*

Housing allowance is an important and targeted instrument for helping those who have difficulties in the housing market. Housing allowance allows these groups to establish decent homes and

represents security for those who already have a home. Recently, the Norwegian Parliament adopted a governmental proposal which improved the Housing Allowance Scheme considerably. After the proposal 45 000 – 50 000 new households are entitled to apply for housing allowance. This is in addition to the 100.000 households who already receive such support. When fully implemented, 1 billion NOK in addition to the present 2.4 billion NOK will be allocated to housing allowances through the Stat Budget.

#### *Start loans*

“Start loans” through the Housing Bank, are available to young people and vulnerable groups to help them buy their own homes. Start Loans are issued by municipalities to households that have difficulties in entering the local housing market, and may also be granted to households with a large debt burden in order to enable them to keep their homes.

#### *Grants for rented accommodation*

The Housing bank also awards grants for rented accommodation. In order to enable local authorities to increase the number of rental dwellings, the Housing Bank is supposed to give grants to 3000 new rented homes in 2009. And to encourage greater efforts to assist the most vulnerable, the Government allows the Housing Bank, in special cases to provide housing grants covering up to 40% of the total expenditure on certain types of accommodation. This is the case when the local authority has to provide service to the inhabitant, such as for substance abusers and other seriously disadvantaged groups.

#### *Competence Grants*

The housing Bank also provides “Competence Grants”. In 2008 the Housing Bank provided 160 such grants for both smaller and larger projects, mostly to municipalities and NGOs; users and interest organisations. We try to encourage the grants receivers even further by giving an award every year for the best initiative to combat homelessness.

More information can be found in English on the Ministry of Local government and regional development website at [www.regjeringen.no](http://www.regjeringen.no) and The Norwegian state housing bank at [www.husbanken.no](http://www.husbanken.no).

## Annex 2: Surveying homelessness in Norway

### Background

Norway has conducted four nationwide homeless surveys. The first survey was conducted in 1996 based on the model used in a 1991 Swedish survey. There were a number of good arguments in favour of copying the Swedish survey: The method had already been designed and tested. Generally speaking, Norway and Sweden have the same welfare system, and it could therefore be assumed that both the method and the definition of homelessness were transferable. In 2005, Denmark adopted largely the same definition and method. Thus there are three Nordic countries with reasonably comparable figures for, and profiles of, homelessness.

Norway has repeated the survey three times: in 2003, 2005 and 2008. The figures for 2008 were published in June 2009. Together these four surveys constitute a time series with comparable figures.

### Design and method

The method is quantitative data collection based on a questionnaire. The design describes the overall approach and organisation of the survey. The respondents in the study are bodies that have, or are assumed to have, contact with homeless people. This requires a two-step study: step one is a survey of the respondents and step two is the respondents' registration of the homeless people they have contact with or are aware of.

The number of respondents has increased by around 40 per cent since 1996 and the last survey (2008) involved 1,292 respondents. The respondents can be categorised into the following main categories: social services, housing services, child welfare services, health services (substance abuse rehabilitation and mental health services are the most important), correctional services, police and district sheriffs, temporary provision for homeless people and crisis centres for women. The respondents are local authorities, national agencies and private bodies (mainly NGOs). Social services are a typical example of a local authority respondent group; the Norwegian Correctional Services is a national agency, while health services encompass both local authority and national respondents.

The definition and operationalisation of homelessness is part of the research design. The definition consists of two elements. The starting point is that people are without owned or rented housing. *In addition* homelessness is delimited to the following situations: The person lacks overnight shelter, lives in temporary provision, is in prison or an institution and is going to be released or discharged within two months, or the person is temporarily living with friends, acquaintances or relatives. People who permanently live with close relatives or next of kin are *not* regarded as homeless.

The survey is a cross-section study. It records the number of homeless people at a given point in time. The registration of the homeless people in all four of the surveys was carried out in the last week in November/first week in December. The registration is done by the respondents filling in a questionnaire for each homeless person they know of in the relevant week. The questionnaire contains the following groups of questions: some background questions, questions about where they live and questions about the length of homelessness, health, addictions and - introduced in

2008 - debt, loss of income, and situations associated with eviction/loss of housing. The scope of the questionnaire has to be limited, both because a number of respondents fill in a large number of forms and because many of the respondents have limited knowledge about the people they are registering.

All of the forms are returned to the research institute conducting the study. The great number and breadth of respondents means a number of people are registered two or more times (10-12 per cent in the four surveys). Some personal characteristics are registered on each form (initials, *day* of birth and *year* of birth, but not month) with the permission of the Norwegian Data Inspectorate. The only purpose of these is to identify duplicates. This information must be deleted at the end of the project, with the exception of year of birth.

The consent of the homeless people being registered is not obtained. Some personal data is classified as sensitive and partially identifying information. This means that the respondents must be given a dispensation from their professional duty of confidentiality.

The last step involves organising the data set and analysing the data. One time consuming part of this is identifying duplicates. The software picks out the forms with identical personal characteristics (see above). These are manually checked before one confirms whether or not it actually is a duplicate. Norway has 430 local authorities and a representative sample has been taken from smaller local authorities. The number of homeless people in the whole country is calculated on the basis of this sample. A weighting factor is incorporated for the non-response of respondents. Together this results in a figure for homeless people in the whole country. The data set has a large number of units (homeless people). However, the number of variables has been limited, which also restricts the opportunities for analysis. The introduction of a number of new questions in 2008 resulted in more material and provided an opportunity for more advanced analysis techniques than before.

### **Methodological challenges in the data collection**

Generally speaking, one of the major challenges in surveys is to obtain a sufficiently high response rate. Expanding the respondent sample, as has been done in the four surveys, increases the risk of respondents not responding because one is including an increasing number of respondents who have little contact with homeless people. One can also see that the non-response rate in these groups is high, while the local authority social services, which have the most contact with the homeless and register the most, have a response rate of around 90 %.

The actual registration work is a big job for the most important respondents, especially for the social services in large cities. It is therefore important to try and gain support for conducting the surveys from local authority managers, as well as the management of the Norwegian Correctional Services and health enterprises. Experience shows that the response rate will be highest in those places where the work with the homeless is embedded in the local authority's political and/or administrative leadership.

One may not actually reach all of the homeless by registering the homeless via the support systems during the registration week. However, the actual design of the research, going through the support systems, entails a limitation of the definition of homelessness. People with a housing problem who resolve it themselves are thus not counted as homeless. However, it is probable

that the registration does not capture absolutely everyone it would be reasonable to count as homeless. Experience from four surveys provides a good indication that the utilised research design and method provide a good picture and a representative cross-section picture of homelessness in Norway.

### Annex 3: Some highlights from the homelessness surveys in Norway from 1996-2008

Year	2008	2005	2003	1996
<b>Number of registered homeless persons</b>				
Total in Norway	6100	5500	5200	6200
Total in Oslo (the Capital)	1526	1244	1283	2513
Total pr. 1000 inhabitants	1,27	1,19	1,14	1,5
Substance abuse (incl. Drugs, pills and alcohol)	59%	61%	71%	60%
<b>Health</b>				
Psychological problems	33%	38%	32%	24%
Psychological problems <b>and</b> substance abuse	23%	25%	24%	
Physical illness/disability	10%	15%	15%	11%
<b>Country of birth</b>				
Born outside of Norway	19%	18%	12%	15%
<b>Age</b>				
Younger than 24 years	24%	21%	16%	18%
25-34 yrs	30%	33%	32%	36%
35-44 yrs	25%	26%	31%	25%
45-54 yrs	15%	14%	14%	11%
55-64 yrs	4%	4%	5%	5%
65 yrs+	2%	2%	3%	4%
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	76%	76%	76%	76%
Female	24%	24%	24%	24%
<b>Residence</b>				
Institution/prison	25%	25%	28%	37%
Temporary housing, shelters etc.	29%	23%	27%	19%
Temporary with family and friends	37%	42%	32%	34%
Roofless	2%	1%	2%	4%
Other	3%	4%	5%	1%
Not answered	4%	5%	4%	5%