

Quantitative Point in Time Analysis of Homelessness in Denmark

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Looking at Danish work dealing with homelessness published within the last two decades I am somewhat surprised by the rather limited number of publications trying to estimate the number of homeless people – or attempting to provide useable definitions for attempting such estimation.¹ Despite the number of homeless people being one of the supposedly main interests among journalists and politicians (see e.g. Stax, 2001) – when interested in homeless people at all. This does not seem to have encouraged researchers to do larger quantitative based point-in-time analysis of homelessness – e.g. focusing on estimating the distribution of the phenomenon – with a few exceptions that I shall return to below. Instead it seems as if Danish research has had a tendency to focus on analyses of the various measures enacted towards people experiencing the spell of homelessness, e.g. the municipal housing assignments of dwellings in various municipalities (Anker, et al. 2002); the use of special housing arrangements (Jensen, 1995; Jensen, et al. 1997; Grünberger & Nyberg, 2002; Sørensen, 2001), the interaction between social workers and the homeless (Järvinen, 1993).

The reason for this focus directed towards evaluating enacted measures rather than the quantity and characteristics of people experiencing homelessness seems somehow correlated with the existence of quasi-register and register based information on the number of users of shelters for homeless people, i.e. institutions provided under §94 in *Lov om Social Service* (see Stax, 2003b [Paper to WS1]; Stax & Kæmpe, 1999). But I shall argue in the end of this paper that this has left us with hardly any information about homeless people who are not living at shelters.

¹ For the issue of definition see the paper by Stax written for Workshop 1 in the CUHP-project (Stax, 2003b).

Quasi-register based information, a single attempt at a quantitative based estimation, and a variety of more or less loose estimations – the situation until the late 90s

From the beginning of the 80s at least, the national Danish statistical institute – Statistics Denmark – collected information on homeless people. Through a questionnaire filled out by each § 105-institution² Statistics Denmark obtained information about the institutions' clients. The information was obtained each year during one week in January. During this week, the institutions were supposed to report the number of enrolments, staff, and available beds. However, as the collected information did not include any unique identifier for the people in question, there was no information as to how many different people actually used the beds at the shelters during the week of counting, nor were there any information as to who these people were, or why they used a shelter. It was a very simple counting of the number of institutions, the number of available beds, the average enrolled individuals per day, and the number of people employed (cf. table 1).

Table 1. Developments at the § 105-institutions during one week in January (1977-1998).

| | # Institutions | # Beds | # 24h users | # Day users ³ | Total # of users | Staff size [*] |
|----------------|----------------|--------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| 1982 | 47 | 2,383 | 2,118 | 314 | 2,432 | 903 |
| 1987 | 65 | 2,577 | 2,510 | 367 | 2,877 | 1,219 |
| 1992 | 76 | 2,588 | 2,425 | 522 | 2,947 | 1,338 |
| 1993 | 74 | 2,549 | 2,503 | 489 | 2,992 | 1,415 |
| 1994 | 76 | 2,470 | 2,337 | 454 | 2,791 | 1,342 |
| 1995 | 78 | 2,435 | 2,218 | 552 | 2,770 | 1,321 |
| 1996 | 80 | 2,330 | 2,138 | 718 | 2,856 | 1,357 |
| 1997 | 83 | 2,323 | 2,332 | 952 | 3,284 | 1,417 |
| 1998 | 86 | 2,377 | 2,412 | 849 | 3,261 | 1,562 |
| Change '82-'98 | 39 | -6 | 294 | 535 | 829 | 659 |

^{*} The staff size is converted into full-time positions.

Source: Statistics Denmark 1982; 1988; 1993; 1995; 1996A-C; 1997A+B, 1998A+B

The table is taken from Stax & Kæmpe, 1999.

² § 105-institutions are equivalent to what is now called § 94-institutions. These institutions are shelters, half-way houses, and like institutions providing temporary shelter for homeless people. For more information see Stax, 2003b or Stax & Kæmpe, 1999.

³ "Day users" are people using the facilities of shelters during daytime – e.g., using some production facilities where clients may be activated in accordance with the social legislation.

Despite this rather limited available information – the information did not shed light on whom the homeless people were – no attempt was made at generating further information on a national level. Two studies from the early 90s did, however, try to focus on the homeless people in Copenhagen, namely *Socialt udstødte i Københavns Kommune [Socially Excluded in the Municipality of Copenhagen]* by Eskelinen et al., (1994) and *Yngre hjemløse i København [Younger Homeless in Copenhagen]* by Brandt (1992).

In *Socialt udstødte i Københavns Kommune*, the authors try to estimate the size of the socially excluded and socially threatened individuals in order to identify the public and private measures available for socially excluded and threatened people, and to identify the reasons for social exclusion. First, these questions were answered by mapping out the different measures that exist. This mapping out was made by sending out a questionnaire to a wide range of measures, which the researchers found of relevance to the socially excluded people, asking the staff for both a presentation of their aims and of the users of the measures. Second, the study tried to answer the questions through registration formulas to be filled out at the different measures identified as being of relevance. Preferably one formula should be filled out for each user during a specific day in 1993.

Through the mapping out process, 168 institutions were identified as being of relevance. 143 of these institutions gave information about their clients. The only thing that indicated how the measures were selected initially was a statement telling us that addresses were collected through various sources. In addition, there was no clear definition of neither the socially excluded nor the socially threatened⁴, which made it very difficult to evaluate the relation between the sample included in the study and the population, which the study aims at generating knowledge about. And as the initial sampling of institutions, where clients in the second phase are registered, is somewhat unclear, the relation between the sample of the socially excluded people and the socially excluded people in Copenhagen in general becomes unclear as well. Thus, it is very difficult to see what the knowledge that was collected about the 4,341 people who used the 143 measures during one day in October is actually telling us about the socially excluded and the socially threatened people. The

⁴ The definition used is taken from Fridberg, and it simply states that the excluded or those threatened by exclusion are “those who more than briefly either are incapable of supporting themselves in ways that are acceptable to society as a whole or acceptable to him- or herself, or who are incapable of caring for themselves in ways that are acceptable to society as a whole or acceptable to him- or herself.” (1992:32). For a discussion of the Danish definition of homelessness and social exclusions see Stax, 2003b.

problem is enhanced, as it is not clear who filled out the registration formulas about the clients, or how the registered information was collected. In the report, it is simply stated that the staff at some institutions chose to fill out the formula themselves, whereas the staff at other institutions chose to fill out the formula together with the clients.

Having presented these methodological problems in the report I shall briefly outline the primary findings, which – as is as well recognized in the report – are rather uncertain. The report estimates:

- that at least 1,750 people are socially excluded in Copenhagen
- that a little more than 1/5 of the socially excluded in Copenhagen are women
- that the main reasons for men's use of the institutions – estimated by the staff – are 1) homelessness (30 percent), 2) substance abuse (26 percent), and need for psycho-social support (14 percent)⁵
- that the main reasons for women's use of the institutions – estimated by the staff – are 1) substance abuse (25 percent), 2) need for psycho-social support (19 percent), and 3) homelessness (15 percent).⁶

The study on the younger homeless focuses on people between the age of 18 and 35 who used shelters in Copenhagen between the summer of 1988 and the summer of 1989. Intentionally, Brandt collected information on the enrolments of everyone within this age group who spent five days or more at a shelter in Copenhagen during the one-year period. In the study there are only little – or close to none – reflections on the reliability of the data construction, and it has not been possible to get an insight into the actual procedure as to obtaining information about the clients included in the study.

The information that Brandt collected on younger users of the shelters are: the institutions that clients are enrolled in, age and gender, time of enrolment and discharge, their income source and their social security number.⁷ In addition to the registration of the use of institutions, 129 were according to Brandt himself (1992:52) randomly selected for filling out a questionnaire. In this process, Brandt first selected the institutions where the individuals to be interviewed should be living. How many individuals to interview at each institution depended on the number of younger

⁵ Two causes could be given per client.

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⁷ I shall touch more on the collection of social security numbers in the paper for Workshop 3, as these are the basis for the longitudinal analysis carried out by Stax (1999). In the study on the younger homeless, the social security numbers only serve as identifiers for the people in the sample, making it possible to see whether an individual has been enrolled previously during the year of data retrieval.

homeless individuals who had actually been staying at the institutions three months prior to the initiation of Brandt's project.⁸ The institution staff should draw lots among the younger homeless who stayed at the shelter on a particular day – excluding the clients who did not want to participate. The selected individuals were interviewed a couple of days later. 135 individuals altogether were asked for an interview and only 6 individuals did not participate – which I find to be an incredibly high response rate! The interviewees were asked about their upbringing, their early life as grown-ups, their current social, mental and physical condition, and were finally admitted and diagnosed by the interviewer (Brandt himself) in accordance with the ICD-8 diagnosis system. Finally, Brandt carried out qualitative interviews with an unspecified number of people in the sample.

The knowledge to be obtained from the study concerns the characteristics of a certain group of people – younger homeless people in Copenhagen. Among these, 18 percent were women (Brandt, 1992:65). 66 percent were on social welfare, 16 percent received early retirement pension,⁹ 9 percent had a job, and 9 percent had another source of income (Brandt, 1992:63). With regard to childhood, Brandt concludes that a troubled childhood leads to a troubled life as an adult with limited contact to others, unemployment and the like. By comparing the number of 18 to 35-year-olds, who use shelters, with the equivalent age group in Copenhagen, Brandt estimates that around 1 percent of all men passes through a shelter at least once, and that the equivalent rate for women is 0.3 percent. But this estimation seems very uncertain; especially as Brandt also shows that only about 60 percent of the users of the shelters included in the project are registered as citizens in Copenhagen (1992:70). In general, this study does not tell us anything about the homeless people compared with other people, and it makes no attempt to seriously estimate rates of homelessness at all.

But, despite the rather limited – if not very limited – number of scientifically sound studies attempting to estimate size and composition of the homeless population in Denmark, numbers have been present in the public and political debate on homelessness. During the early 90s, the number of homeless people mostly quoted seemed to be a figure taken from Fridberg who stated that between 12,000 and 13,000 people used § 105-institutions during a year. This number is based on his assessment of available beds nationwide and information on the number of clients using these beds at a few selected institutions (Fridberg, 1992). In 1996, the Ministry of Social Affairs asked the 14

⁸ It is not clear how these numbers were obtained.

⁹ The early retirement pension is a transfer income for people who are considered not to be capable of working, e.g. due to their mental or physical condition.

Regional Counties and the two municipalities Copenhagen and Frederiksberg¹⁰ about their experience in homelessness. They estimated that around 11,000 people were using shelters during a year (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1996). And quite a few others – e.g. social workers in the field and consultancies – have been providing various estimates.¹¹ They often reach the conclusion that between 8,000 and 13,000 people are homeless – but it is not possible to state why and how they reach this estimation. The studies are not what I would call empirically proven.

The creating of a national register

In the late 90s, *Den Sociale Ankestyrelse* together with the Ministry of Social Affairs decided to collect information known to be available about tenants at most shelters in a national register. For many years, much information had been recorded at various institutions, but in order to collect the information nationally work concerning standardization was necessary. In the year 2000, a reliability and coverage sufficient for *Den Sociale Ankestyrelse* to go ahead and make its first annual publication on the users of shelters was reached. Since then a yearly report has been published, and according to *Den Sociale Ankestyrelse*, (2003:12), with a steadily improved quality and coverage of information. In the recently published report concerning the use of shelters for 2002, it is estimated that 98 percent of enrolments and discharges at the shelters are included (*Den Sociale Ankestyrelse*, 2003:11).

The special feature of the registration is that it includes the enrolled client's social security number. This number is a unique identifier for each person staying in Denmark more than just temporarily. By including this number, it is possible to cross check for enrolment errors, e.g. if an individual is enrolled in one institution but is formally still living at another institution from where he might not yet be registered as being discharged. Furthermore, it is for instance possible to find out how many different people are actually using the shelters during a certain period and also to see how many times any given individual has been enrolled and discharged during any given period.¹²

The variables included in the register are institutions; number of beds; enrolment and discharge; a client's citizenship, age, and gender; from where the client has been referred if he or she has been

¹⁰ Copenhagen and Frederiksberg are the only municipalities that are not included in a regional county.

¹¹ For an overview of various estimates see Järvinen, 1992; Børner, 1997.

¹² By using this unique identifier, it is possible to collect information from other registers as well and thereby possible to construct something like a life history of the clients. This is an issue that I shall return to in Workshop 3 of the CUHP.

referred; what type of income the client sustains at the time of enrolment; where the client is moving to at the time of discharge when this is known; and finally how and why a client has been discharged.

Some information on clients at shelters

This is not the place for outlining all the actual empirical findings obtainable from the information in the register created by *Den Sociale Ankestyrelse*. It is sufficient to state that during 2002, 67 § 94-institutions (all § 94-institutions in Denmark) provided the national register with information, but one institution did not provide the national register with information about clients. On January 1, 2002, 2,666 individuals lived at institutions that provided all kind of information. During 2002, 7,567 individuals lived at a § 94-institution one time or another. 19,878 times someone was enrolled in a shelter. The total duration of these 7,567 individuals' stay can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. Users of § 94-institutions by a client's total number of days enrolled in 2002.

| | Days at shelter during a year | | | | | | Total | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|---------|-----|---------|---------|
| | 1 | 2-5 | 6-30 | 31-119 | 120-364 | 365 | Clients | Average |
| Nationally Clients | 308 | 1,090 | 1,692 | 1,848 | 1,701 | 928 | 7,567 | 116 |

The table is based on information from *Den Sociale Ankestyrelse*, 2003:26.

The information in the register also shed light on the users of the institutions. Information on the users' age and gender is provided in table 3.

Table 3. Users of § 94-institutions by gender and age, 2002.

| Age | -19 | 20-29 | 30-39 | 40-49 | 50-59 | 60- | Total ¹³ | % |
|--------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|---------------------|----|
| Women | 74 | 459 | 523 | 539 | 296 | 73 | 1,964 | 25 |
| Men | 103 | 932 | 1,718 | 1,829 | 1,070 | 358 | 6,010 | 75 |

The table is based on information from *Den Sociale Ankestyrelse*, 2003:30.

Finally, I have chosen to present a little information in table 4 relating to the discharge of clients.

¹³ The reason why the total adds up to 7,974 and not 7,567 as is the case in table 2 is that the information on clients include about 400 individuals who use the institutions that provide information in the daytime only, e.g. being in job training at a possible factory run by the shelter.

Table 4. The discharge of clients of § 94-institutions by discharge process, 2002.

| | Total | % |
|---------------------------|--------|-----|
| Planned | 8,859 | 55 |
| Not planned | 2,507 | 16 |
| After being absent | 474 | 3 |
| Expulsion | 522 | 3 |
| Death | 32 | 0 |
| Other | 897 | 6 |
| Unknown | 2,882 | 18 |
| Total | 16,173 | 100 |

The table is based on information from *Den Sociale Ankestyrelse*, 2003:37.

Some methodological issues on register based data

Having outlined some of the findings based on the information in the register I shall touch on some methodological aspects concerning the collecting and use of this type of information. Let me first explain why I touch on this issue in a paper dealing with point-of-time analysis rather than longitudinal analysis (being the issue for Workshop 3 in the CUHP). The main reason is a choice of analysis unit – in this case the client. By the choice of clients as the analysis unit, information from a register on the users of shelters becomes point-of-time analysis – they inform us about the whereabouts of the clients at a specific point of time, but they shed no light on clients' way to and from the shelter (besides the sparse information available about enrolments and discharges). Had I, alternatively, chosen the shelters as the analysis unit, the register information might have been treated as longitudinal data. They could have told us a story about the development in occupancy rate, development in income type among tenants at shelters, and the like. The point here, however, is that I have chosen the clients as the analysis unit and am therefore presenting the information provided in the register as a continuous row of point-of-time data collecting sessions.

This leads me to the issue of which type of data collecting methods is used in the collecting of the register-based information. I have previously defined register-based research as “research drawing data from registers created for administrative purpose rather than created for research” and a register “as a set of standardized quantitative data that can be re-associated with the specific object that the data intends to inform about, where the object can be an enterprise, an individual, or a similar unit.” (Stax, 2003a) The important part of this definition is that the information is provided for something else than the piece of research for which the information is later used and that the

information thus exists prior to the carrying out of this specific research project. This significantly alters the possibilities in comparison with for instance a survey that the researcher herself designs. First, it imposes a condition – that does not have to be a problem – on register-based research, namely a ‘take it or leave it’-clause. Either you design a project answerable to the information available in the register, or you leave the data behind.¹⁴

Having decided to draw on the information available in registers, other issues – and these seem to be problematic for the validity and reliability of register-based research project – emerge. The distance between the data construction and the use of data would seem to be correlated with both the validity and reliability of a research project – and this problem might be increased with the degree of chaos and deviation among the population in focus. Based on my analysis of trajectories among previously homeless people (Stax, 1999, 2000), I here suggest the hypothesis that a characterization of people using shelters is that they – at least compared to most other groups in Danish society – often defy the underlying assumption in register-based research in terms of the possibility of unambiguously categorization on registered variables – or in other words: people experiencing homelessness may be characterized as people living between the unambiguous. This can be illustrated by an (extreme) example from my previous research (Stax, 1999): a person is according to registered information living in ordinary housing, but this registered ordinary housing turns out to be nothing but an piece of land with no buildings at all. We discovered the case as we took a look at the addresses where the former homeless people were supposed to be living, but in most register-based research one cannot carry out such validity testing – one has to abide by the ‘take it or leave it’-clause.

As a consequence, the validity of register-based research relies largely on the quality of 1) the information gathered by the street-level bureaucrats, and 2) the statistical validity constructed by the owner of the register. And often the degree of documentation on the method of data construction¹⁵ and data processing¹⁶ leaves plenty of room for improvement (Stax, 1999). Furthermore, at both levels of the data construction process one can identify incentives running counter to the interest of the researchers using the information after having bought access. For example, the street-level bureaucrat might have an interest in creaming the intake at an institution in order to provide better

¹⁴ I am not taking the possibilities of combining different approaches into account, but am talking about register-based research in its pure form.

¹⁵ Is the information, for example, gathered through a monthly or yearly questionnaire or is it the result of registration created in the everyday working routines.

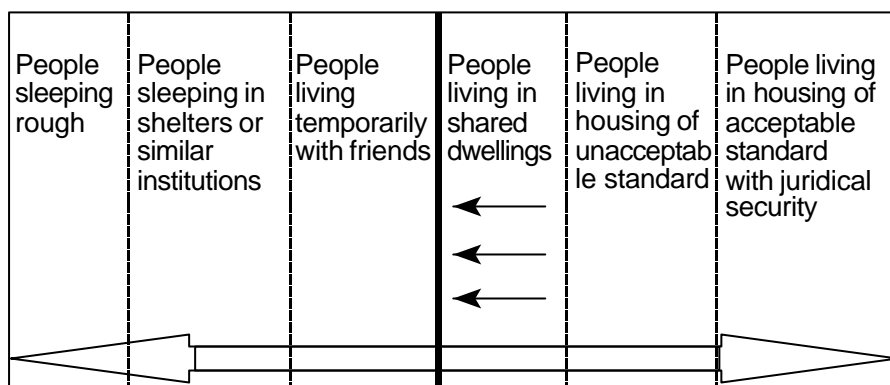
¹⁶ E.g. the process of translating the raw empirical material into variables is useful for research.

results – measured, however – or in pumping up the number of clients, or *vice versa* for that matter. And the owner of the register might, for example, have an interest in underplaying the uncertainty of the registered information thereby increasing its value for researchers. I am not writing that such ‘fiddling’ takes place, but I am arguing that the ‘take it or leave it’-clause to a larger degree does leave the researcher blind as to data quality when compared to information gathered through, say surveys or qualitative interviews, and I am arguing that the validity and reliability of a register are only two important aspects among others that the data-provider and data holder needs to weight against other aspects, e.g. a sound economy for the institution providing data and the owner of the register. And just as one would expect a researcher doing qualitative interviews to reflect on the position from which the interviewee and the interviewer speak, one should reflect on the positions from which agents act in register-based research.

Registering homelessness or registering clients at one type of service?

Now, returning to the specific register information that I have dwelt on above I should like to make one further point: the information available in the register about people using shelters are evaluated by the owner as providing an almost complete picture of the use of § 94-institutions in Denmark – an estimated 98 percent of enrollments and discharges (*Den Sociale Ankestyrelse*, 2003:11). Thus it seems that the previous hole in the Danish knowledge when it comes to quantity of homelessness might be closed. But, is this necessary so? Yes and no. It is evident that the information enables a better understanding of homelessness than one had before the register was created, but it is also evident that the register touches on one type of homelessness only. Borrowing an understanding of homelessness taken from Stax, 2001 – reproduced in figure 1 – which draws on a home-to-homeless continuum (see also Watson, 1984; Watson & Austerberry, 1986) one can see types of homeless people that are not included in the register, and about whom no scientifically sound quantitative knowledge seems to exist.

Figure 1. Homelessness understood according to place of residence.



The figure indicates the understanding, which Stax argues exists in the Danish discourse on homelessness. It presents some of the groups that flourish in the research and in the political debates on the issue. These groups are people sleeping rough, people living at shelters, people living doubled up and temporarily with friends. It also indicates that the people living in shared dwellings (which today should be extended also to include a wider range of special housing arrangements, see Jensen et al., 1997; Grünberger & Nyberg, 2002; Sørensen, 2001; Stax, 2001) are not considered as being homeless; these people have been provided with a place for (almost) permanent residency.¹⁷ Here the important point is that awareness exists within the research and the policy on homelessness about the existence of other types of people experiencing homelessness than those staying at shelters, but still these are not attempted counted. In their analysis of people living on the street, Caswell & Schultz have pointed out how limited the Danish research has been: almost everyone takes people living at shelters as exponents of the phenomenon of homelessness, and almost nobody looks elsewhere – except for convenient illustrations where a conventional street-man might come in handy (2001).

Thus, to conclude, only were few projects have attempted to estimate the Danish homeless population. Today quantitative estimates rely primarily on information in a register – which does provide useful information – but very little knowledge does people not living at shelters where the registered information is gathered experience about types of homelessness.

¹⁷ This is not the place for a discussion of whether or not special housing arrangement actually is permanent. It is sufficient to say that it is not evident, and it is dependent on the specific housing arrangement.

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