

Danish research on Homelessness with a focus on Hidden Homelessness

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Summary

The paper presents the overall trends in Danish homelessness research and concludes that there has not been much focus upon hidden homelessness. In a recent study, however, hidden homelessness is found as well as a reason for open homelessness as an experience shared by former open homeless but also by the population as such.

1. Introduction

The aim of this short paper is

- to give a brief overview of issues and theories in Danish homelessness-research
- to present the theoretical point of departure for our own research¹
- to give a brief presentation of the legal and statistical concepts of homelessness in Denmark
- to present the little we know about hidden homelessness

2. Issues and theories in Danish Homelessness-research

Concepts and numbers

Many researchers have bothered with the problem of defining homelessness, because this is a prerequisite for describing the phenomenon and for reporting about trends in nature and extent of homelessness. In 1992 Preben Brandt ventured the following definition that has been rather influential in as well research as legislation, though it has also been met with criticism.

“A person is homeless if he/she has not got a home that can be regarded as stable or permanent and meets his/her demands for a reasonable standard of dwelling. He/she is furthermore incapable of using the different relations and institutions offered by society – e.g. family network and private and public institutions of every kind. The reason for this can be some open or hidden conditions inherent within the persons themselves or in the societal structure” (1992 p. 158) (own translation.)

¹ This research – a comprehensive project on Exit from Homelessness – was presented in Copenhagen. It contains an analysis based upon registers as well as a quantitative survey based upon interviews with 842 former users of institutions for homeless people.

Nordentoft – also a psychiatrist – in her doctoral dissertation from 1996 – criticised Brandt, because he connects the lack of an abode with the inability to use the institutions of society. Later on Brandt elaborates on this description making it more process – oriented and also less individualistic (Brandt 1999).

“That is how homeless are. They are people who are “wrong” in relation to what we others consider to be “right”; they behave differently. They do not live in a way that we find right, and cannot utilise society’s institutions in the term’s broadest sense. From the point of view of ordinary citizens the homeless are different in a negative sense, and we exclude them from our ordinary social life. We do not like them” (1999 p. 511).

Kjær Jensen (Jensen 1995) works with a definition very close to Brandt’s from 1992 though stressing that it cannot be applied in an effort to quantify homelessness. In 1993 Eskelinen et al. (1994)² tried to count the number not of homeless but of “socially excluded” in the municipality of Copenhagen. The socially excluded were defined as people:

- who have experienced a process of exclusion what concerns labour market, family, friend, colleagues etc.
- who need help from others because of massive personal/individual problems
- who have an unmet need for help in order to be able to be integrated in society

They furthermore sat up a category of persons on the way to social exclusion, who are isolated and socially threatened.

The aim of the study was to estimate the proportion of those kinds of people in institutions and services. The study was carried out through a one-day census where both private and public institutions and street-level social workers were asked to categorise the users of the different services. It turned out that homelessness was only seen as the main cause for social exclusion for approx. ¼ of those categorised as “socially excluded”. The method applied is probably neither fit for measuring social exclusion or homelessness. But it is a good example of the political demand for figures.

Stax (2001) suggests another approach that demonstrates the inherent problems of the endeavour to define and quantify homelessness at all. He sees two dimensions in the general and imprecise understanding of the word. One relates to the question of “homelessness as a place” (where do people actually stay) – constructed alongside a continuum (not too far from that of Feantsa’s), but his point is that “the categories included in this continuum change over time as do the demarcations of which groups are considered socially excluded and/or homeless”. The other dimension has to do with “homelessness as types of people”, where different constructed ideal types are considered to belong under the concept of homelessness (street children, the traditional homeless, the mental patients and the drug addicts), while users of shelters for battered women are not included in the usual perception of the phenomenon in Denmark (It would be more correct to say that the groups seem to move in and of the concept and of the statistics). He stresses that the definition is not only of an academic interest: the choice of definition might very well influence the policies for those groups.

² See also The Danish National Report for Feantsa from 1995.

Bech Jørgensen (1999) also questions the possibility to define homelessness. She claims that what should be defined is *normality* that we seem to take for granted. If we did not have the idea of normality there would be no idea of those outside normality.

Efforts to define subgroups or related groups: street children and bag people can be found in Juul & Ertmann (1992) and in Caswell & Schultz (2001). Both definitions are based upon fieldwork and are of a phenomenological character.

“Street children are children and young persons under 18 years of age who for shorter or longer periods of time spend their lives in special street environments such as Christiania, around the Central Station, in buildings occupied by squatters, in shopping centres and in other more temporary places in the city. They include young people who are uprooted and whose primary attachment is to groups in the street environment. Nominally they may have an address with their parents or in an institution, but the crucial difference is that they actually spend little time there and that there are no adults - represented by parents, schools, institutions and social welfare authorities – with whom they have a binding relation.” (1992, p.11) own translation.

“Bag people are elderly mentally ill human beings living in the streets, isolated from human contact, without relation to the social system or the health system and without any considerable abuse (own translation).

Caswell and Schultz (2001) criticise the Danish research tradition where the nominal definitions of homelessness have been broad, but *where the operational definitions have often centred on the users of services, leaving the non-users as e.g. the bag people out.*

In spite of the inherent problems in defining homelessness as such there has been – and is – a political and administrative request for *figures*. Not till very recently has a proper statistical base been established – covering user of institutions/accommodations under section 94 (previously 105) in the Law on Social Services (Den Sociale Ankestyrelse 2002a) see 3 below.

Brandt has several times tried to estimate the number of “homeless” almost following the definition of Feantsa and thus also trying to include hidden homelessness. In 1995 he estimated the number in Copenhagen based upon his own walking the streets in the night and knowledge of the users from Sundholm (the biggest institution for homeless in Copenhagen). He included rough sleepers (450), users of § 105 institutions (1000), those temporarily using other institutions (e.g. prison, hospital etc. (150)), and those dwelling erratically (2000), which sums up to approx. 3.600 persons (National Report for Feantsa 1995).

The report about Street children (Juul & Ertmann 1991) also tried to estimate the number of street children in Copenhagen to 300. The report was based upon interviews with practitioners and some children reached through projects and “the snowball – method” – not a very valid method, of which

the authors are themselves aware: there is a big variation in the different estimations from different actors in the field and furthermore they are dealing with a very fluctuating group.

Recently the number of bag people has been estimated – with caution also – to 150 at a national level (Caswell & Schultz 2001).

Theoretical trends

Different trends in Danish research related to homelessness can be discerned. We have seen a *psychiatric trend* (Brandt, 1992; Nordentoft, 1994) where the focus is on the connection between properly diagnosed mental illness and homelessness, implying more or less that mental illness and lack of proper treatment is a very important explanatory factor behind homelessness. The traditional *socio-political research* trend takes interest in the development and importance of social welfare institutions and practices (Fridberg, 1992; Kjær Jensen 1995, 1997). The many evaluations of projects and programmes are part of this trend. Under this tradition we can also place studies with the focus on figures and upon follow-up studies (Stax, 1999; Geerdsen et al, 2005). On the other hand we find a *social constructivist* trend where apparent “changes” are explained as stemming from the changes in the functions and structures of societal institutions (Järvinen, 1993; Stax, 2001). And finally a *phenomenological* approach is showing where the aim is to understand more than to explain (Järvinen, Stax, Caswell and Schultz), and by introducing a more relational perspective (the so-called daily life perspective) to include the surroundings and their reactions as part of the picture (Bømler, 2000; Bech Jørgensen, 2001; Jørgensen, 2000).

In short one could say that in research we see that *the concept of “homelessness” has changed from a position of an individual to a process*, where the relations between in and out, normal and abnormal are taken into account. Concerning themes the research could be said to have changed focus from the users of institutions to the more conspicuous groups of street- people.

Hidden homelessness has not been in focus apart from the report on street children. It can be discussed whether street homelessness is hidden, but most of those youngsters did not all the time sleep in the street but also with friends.

1. Theoretical point of departure for own research (Exit from Homelessness?).

Our recent research has been inspired by the definition and operationalization of homelessness done by FEANTSA.

The research-network of FEANTSA has in the later years been working with the issue of formulating a conceptual and operational definition of homelessness which among other things should make it possible to accomplish cross-national comparisons about the extent of homelessness as well as identifying gaps in recent research. This is done – of course - bearing in mind that the greater and more urgent problem is to reduce and combat homelessness.

The policy objectives related to homelessness requires according to FEANTSA that the definition and operationalization of homelessness is able to make existing – and hereby also hidden – homelessness visible. The intention is that homelessness is not only related to rough sleeping or the use of institutions established and arranged for homeless people but also includes people who live

in insecure housing and are forced to move between different insecure housing situations. (Edgar et al, 2004).

The point of departure of the FEANTSA conceptualisation is an interpretation of the word *home* stressing that in order to have a home three conditions should be fulfilled:

“*Having a home can be understood to include:*

- *having an adequate dwelling (or space) over which a person and his/her family can exercise exclusive possession*
- *being able to maintain privacy and enjoy social relations*
- *having legal title to occupy”* (Edgar et al., 2003: 4)

A person then is homeless if he/she has to share space involuntarily, or if he/she does not have space to enjoy personal privacy and social relations, or if he/she does not possess an legal tenancy contract specifying the property to be let, the period of tenancy and a right of exclusive possession. Following this line of thought Edgar et al identifies 5 different conceptual categories which do not meet either the physical, the social or the legal premise.

Table 1: The domains of homelessness

Conceptual category	Physical domain	Social domain	Legal domain
Rooflessness	No dwelling (roof)	No private space for social relations	No legal title to a space for exclusive possession
Houseless	Has a place to live	No private space for social relations	No legal title to a space for exclusive possession
Insecure and inadequate housing	Has a place to live (not secure and unfit for habitation)	Has space for social relations	No security of tenure
Insecure housing (adequate housing)	Has a place to live	Has space for social relations	No security of tenure
Inadequate housing (secure tenure)	Inadequate dwelling (dwelling unfit for habitation)	Has space for social relations	Has legal title and/or security of tenure

Source: Edgar et al, 2003, p. 6.

Based upon this conceptual definition Edgar et al. construct an operational definition that infers 16 categories of living situations which constitute an interpretation of homelessness and should at least in principle be measurable. These 16 operational categories are presented in table 2:

Table 2: Categories of homelessness.

Conceptual Category		Operational Category
Roofless	1	Living in a public space (no abode)
	2	Stay in a night shelter (spending several hours a day in public space)
Houseless	3	Stay in service or refuge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hostels for the homeless - Women's shelters
	4	Live in temporary accommodation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Temporary accommodation (paid by municipality) - Interim accommodation (awaiting assessment) - Transitional living unit (short term lease) - Temporary accommodation reserved for immigrants (asylum seekers, repatriates etc.)
	5	Living in institutions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prison, care centre, hospital who have to leave within (3) months and for whom no accommodation is available
	6	Living in designated supported accommodation (where tenure is dependent upon support being provided)
Insecure and inadequate housing	7	Squatting in building (unfit for habitation)
	8	Living in low budget hotel
Insecure housing	9	Have legal notice to quit/evict.
	10	Living temporarily with family or friends (not through choice)
	11	Living under threat of violence (from partner or family)
	12	Living in dwelling without a normal legal tenancy
Inadequate housing	13	Living in temporary structure or shanty dwelling
	14	Living in mobile home/caravan (which is not legal site or holiday accommodation)
	15	Living in dwelling which is declared unfit for habitation under (national) legislation
	16	Living in dwelling which is severely overcrowded (according to national statutory definition)

The categories don't imply anything about the reasons for homelessness, they are clearly only housing not socially related and they – which is important here – do include different kinds of hidden homelessness.

In Denmark - like in other European countries – no research has been done concerning all these 16 categories of living-/housing situations nor have many attempts been accomplished trying to answer the questions of how many homeless there are in total.

3. “Open Homelessness” in Denmark.

Several Danish researchers though have tried to estimate the number of users of the institutions for homeless during one year. For example Fridberg in 1992 estimated that about 12.000 -13.000 persons annually stayed at institutions for homeless people. These Institutions correspond only to number three of the categories suggested by FEANTSA. The institutions are often referred to as §105-institutions (before 1998) and §94-boformer (after 1998) designated by their belonging to special paragraphs in the legislation. It is also here we find the closest official public definition of homelessness, where the users of institutions/boformer for homeless are characterised as:

“...persons with special social problems, who are without – or are unable to live in - an own apartment, and who are in need for a place to stay and for offers of activating support, care and subsequent assistance.” (Law on Social Service, § 94 (own translation))

Compared to the categories developed by FEANTSA it is remarkable that it is possible to be enrolled in a section 94- boform and at the same time to have a permanent residence. And it is also seen in practice. *The law thus stresses the social issue of homelessness*, meaning that to be a user of a § 94 institution is not a question about legal entitlements to a residence, but about whether you actually can manage to stay and live in your own residence.

Fridbergs estimation relied partly upon data from Statistics Denmark which annually publish a report describing the number of services established according to section 105 of The Social Assistance Act as well as the number of users during one week.³ The reports from Statistics Denmark are drawn up by the institutions themselves counting the numbers of users during one week. In table 3 we present the figures published by Statistics Denmark since Fridbergs report:

Tabel 3: Numbers of institutions and numbers of users.

Year	Institutions	24Hours-users during one week in January	Day-users during one week in January	Total numbers of users, one week in January.
1993	74	2.503	489	2.992
1994	76	2.337	454	2.791
1995	78	2.218	552	2.770
1996	80	2.138	718	2.856
1997	83	2.332	952	3.284
1998	86	2.412	849	3.261

³ In 1998 Law on Social Service replaced The Social Assistance Act and the institutions belonging under paragraph 105 was placed under section 94.

1999	82	2.437	891	3.328
2000	84	2.463	866	3.329
2001	85	2.311	1.345	3.656
2002	87	2.223	1.236	3.459

Source: Munk et al, 2000; Børner, 1997 and Statistics Denmark 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002 & 2003.

The numbers of institutions fluctuate over time, which partly is explained by the closing down and opening of different services. One problem with these data is that doublecounts (see Børner, 1996 for a discussion) are included and further that we have reasons to believe that some institutions actually objected towards housing homeless people are left out. For example we know positively that in 2002 only 20 centres for battered women are presented but another statistics published by the Organisation of refuges in Denmark (Formidlingscenteret for Socialt Arbejde, 2003) relied upon information from 35 different services provisionally housing battered women.

The statistics published by Statistics Denmark are what Järvinen in her status report about the Nordic research of homelessness in the period 1980-1992 characterised as based on definitions of homelessness based upon institutions (Järvinen, 1992: s. 16). Her critics is – among other things - that these kind of data actually only counts the number of places and not the number of homeless persons.

This objection raised by Järvinen is partly met by the nationwide reports published by The Social Appeal Board since 2001. These reports are based upon the special Danish system with personal numbers (the CPR-number) – a unique identifier as Stax called it (Stax, 2004, p. 6) – meaning that the users of the institutions – or Boformer – are registered with their personal number, when they accommodate at institutions objected towards housing homeless people. Thereby it is possible to exclude double-counts. In table 4 we present the data gathered from the report published by The Social Appeal Board until now.

Table 4: Numbers of boformer, numbers of users during one year and the numbers of stays.

	Institutions	Users, whole year	Stays, 24hours.	Stays, day.	Stay, night	Stays, total
2000	66	7.365	12.784	723	4.214	17.721
2001	67	8.314	16.551	774	3.172	20.497
2002	67	7.974	15.505	790	2.565	18.860
2003	67	7.169	15.416	772	2.134	18.322

Source: Den Sociale Ankestyrelse, 2002a, 2002b, 2003 & 2004.

The remarkable decrease in the number of institutions in the statistics published by The Social Appeal Board compared to the number of institutions in the statistics published by Statistics Denmark are explained by the fact that they don't rely on data from exactly the same institutions. ‘

Until recently this kind of administrative data have been the primary source describing the extent of homelessness in Denmark. It should be noticed that only one of the dimensions in the categories proposed by FEANTSA is covered by those statistics.

4. Recent Research done by the National Institute of Social Research

Data and methodology

In 2004 The Danish National Institute of Social Research initiated a rather big investigation about ways out of homelessness funded by The Ministry of Social Affairs.⁴ This was done by collecting the personal numbers of almost 4.700 persons which in 1997 were accommodated at institutions for homeless people in 5 counties and 1 municipality. The institutions were both traditionally homeless-institutions like shelters and reception centres as well as institutions established for women and their kids, so called “family-institutions”. All institutions are established according to section 94 on Law on Social Service.

The project both deals with register data and also a survey was conducted in 2004. A random sampling of 1.600 was drawn out and totally 842 people were interviewed by the interviewing-staff of the institute (A rather high percentage when considering the population.) The research-questions of the project were:

- How many of the former users of the institutions for homeless has obtained a better and more stable existence?
- What characterizes the persons who have experienced a positive development and those that have not?
- How can we explain the different outcomes focusing upon different public efforts?

In the following some of the results from the survey will be presented to shed light on the former users - of institutions for homeless - contemporary housing situation in order to see, what it tells about hidden homelessness. Also we will dwell upon the causes of homelessness. This last part of the presentation will be discussed with reference to the 16 categories suggested by FEANTSA, which have been a great inspiration when working out the questionnaire.

Results.

The participants in the survey have been asked about their reasons for being accommodated at an institution for homeless in 1997. The results are presented in table 5:

Table 5: Distribution of answers to the question: Why did you seek accommodation at a reception centre, a shelter or a refuge?

	Family- institution	Shelter etc.	Total
Drinking too much	3	52	42
Dissolved relationship	58	35	40
Physical or psychical illness	9	33	29
Could not stay any longer with relatives*	26	21	22
Could not stay any longer with	19	20	20

⁴ The Danish report will be published in May, 2005.

friends *			
Due to addiction (hard drugs)	1	21	17
Violence from partner or member of family	34	8	13
Without residence/extreme housing conditions	15	14	14
Did not pay rent	6	14	12
Public debt	5	13	12
Private debt	3	9	8
Went bankrupt	1	4	3
Nervous for living alone	10	11	11
Discharged from hospital*	4	11	10
Released from prison*	0	6	5
Hidden homelessness	82	69	71
Totally			
Number of persons	158	684	842

* Categories of hidden homelessness.

** More answers have been possible.

It is remarkable that about one fifth has answered that they could no longer stay with relatives or with friends. It seems that this functions as a solution to temporary homelessness but also that you can misuse this, and therefore ends up accommodated at an institution for homeless people. Staying with friends and relatives is an insecure housing situation which corresponds to category 10 of the categories above suggested by FEANTSA and can be categorised as hidden homelessness. Under this category might also fall people who are under discharge from hospital and prison without having an address to return to. So all in all hidden homelessness accounts for an important part as a reason for “open homelessness”.

The Contemporary housing situation for the 842 persons interviewed at the time of the interview in 2004 can be seen from table 7. It is surprising that such a great part now live in their private apartment, but the rest is divided into two almost equally great groups who live either in “open “ homelessness – 13 per cent – or in “hidden” homelessness – 10 per cent.

Table 7: Living situation in 2004.

	All
Own residence (rent, owner etc.)	78
Section 94-institution	13
Lives at family, friends, as subtenant or others	9
Total	100
Number of persons	842

In order to have a more varied picture of the overall housing carrier of the former users of institutions, we also asked whether they within the last five years had experienced different kinds of homelessness, among those hidden homelessness. We here have had the possibility to ask a representative sample of the Danish population the same questions.

Table 8: Experiences with homelessness the last 5 years. Percent

	Family institutions in 1997	Shelters etc. in 1997	All	Danish population in general*
Has been a subtenant **	12	22	20	11
Temporary at friends/relatives**	19	25	24	9
Halfway house	3	15	12	1
Shelter, reception centre, refuge etc.	27	41	39	Less than 1
Prison**	1	12	10	Less than 1
On the street	4	17	17	0
Share with at least one homelessness-experience	43	64	60	17
Numbers	158	684	842	1.110

Note: It is possible to have experienced more than one kind of homelessness the last 5 years.

* Age between 20-66.

** hidden homelessness

*** More answers have been possible.

Looking upon what we have categorised as hidden homelessness it is evident, that this is a significant way of life among the former users of institutions. The respondents have not answered for how long or how often their situation was like that, but generally they it is much more often than the general population. The amount of persons who has been subtenants – that is FEANTSA category number 4 (live in temporary accommodation) – and been in prison (category number 5) is considerable higher than in the general population, and especially among the former users of shelters etc. Generally the persons who stayed at family institutions in 1997 does differ significantly from the general population when considering experiences with homeless but they do not differ as much as the former users of shelters etc.

This is probably the only result about hidden homelessness in the whole population. And the proportion is not insignificant. It can of course be discussed whether students living for a short period with friends should be counted this way, but due to the Feantsa categories they should.

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