



FEANTSA

**European Observatory on Homelessness:
Thematic Report 2006**

Norway

**Roofless People and Use of Public Place,
a Study in Oslo**

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Preface

This paper is part of a collaboration within the European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH), the research network of FEANTSA. As non-member of the European Union Norway has not been a member of EOH. However, during a year and a half I have had the opportunity to participate as an observer. During this period I joined Work Group 2, one out of three work groups in the Observatory.

Work Group 2 has focused on the theme of profiling homelessness. Thanks to funding from Directory for Health and Social Affairs in Norway I have been able to take part in the project “Conflict, rooflessness and the use of public space”, which was the research theme of the work group in 2006. The project is reported in this paper. It is also presented in a joint paper with the reports from similar projects in Spain, Slovenia, Hungary, Czech Republic, France, Luxemburg and Belgium.

While finishing the report, the very sad message of the death of the coordinator of Work Group 2, Henk Meert arrived. I owe him a lot of gratitude for arousing my interest in homelessness and use of public space as a research theme.

Oslo, October 31 2006

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1 Introduction

This paper deals with roofless people's use of public space. The paper is based upon a study in Oslo conducted in spring 2006. Although the study is limited both in scale and time, it might provide some important and perhaps general knowledge about living in the streets and being without a private room.

Public and private places are conceived as two different spheres. In general public place is often thought of as places where all citizens have access. But both access and use of public places are regulated by legislation, culture, norms and general rules of conduct. In the following quote, Low and Smith define the demarcation between private and public space in brief terms:

Public space is traditionally differentiated from private space in terms of rules of access, the sources and nature of control over entry to a space, individual and collective behaviour sanctioned in specific spaces, and rules of use. Whereas private space is demarcated and protected by state regulated-rules of private property use, public space, while far from free of regulation, is generally conceived as open to greater or lesser public participation. (Low & Smith 2006: 3-4)

According to Low and Smith both public and private place is regulated by law, but by quite different laws. The theme in this paper is homeless peoples use of public place and the further discussion mainly focuses on understandings and definitions of public place. But as homeless persons to some extent may carry out what is considered as being private matters in public space, what is understood as privacy and private space should also be paid some attention to.

Public space comprises a wide range of different places, institutions and spaces. A variety listed by Low and Smith includes the street, the park, the media, the Internet, the shopping mall, The United Nations, national governments and local neighbourhoods. These are very different arenas. The purposes, roles, functions, regulations and access are equivalent diversified.

The dimensions and extent of its publicness are highly differentiated from instance to instance. Legally as well as culturally, the suburban mall is a very different place from the national park or the interior of a transcontinental airliner. Clearly the term has a broad definition. (Low and Smith 2006:3)

Public space and places are delimited for particular purposes and/or to conduct specific activities.

For the purpose of this paper, one may roughly make a division between public places and semi public places. The most obvious examples of public places are streets, squares and

publicly owned parks. Semi public places are privately owned but the public has in general access. Shops and restaurant are examples for semi public places. Shops and restaurants are privately owned but where everyone should have the right to enter. To deny a person admittance has to be explained or justified by arguing that the person is violating specific rules and regulations. Some rules are clear and indisputable. Such rules are age limits in bars or in certain areas of the pubs (e. g. pubs in England). Public transport, regardless of whether the transport company is privately or publicly owned, requires a valid ticket. These are simple examples of regulations of access to public places.

Terminals for public transport have for instant a rather specific purpose. They are also characterised by people both passing through and spending time just waiting for their trains and buses to come and go. The control of who is staying in waiting rooms has normally been low. That might also be an explanation for why homeless people often has gathered in terminals and waiting rooms for public transport. But the character of the waiting rooms has changed. As is the case at the main railway station in Oslo, the common places are taken over by shops and restaurant. Along with this development the surveillance has increased. The areas are monitored both by surveillance cameras and security guards.

Privatisation of shopping areas has increased in Norway, as well as in other countries, by the growth of shopping malls, where also the ground between the shops and restaurants are private space. Together with increased presence of private security guards, the enclosure of “free” space between the shops and restaurants within the shopping malls has expanded privatisation of public space.

There are others less defined and often diffuse regulations of public space. It is often linked to rules, norms and expectation of behaviour in public place. Unlike the Mediterranean countries (see Cabrera 2006), Norway has little culture for outdoor festivities and activities. Drinking alcohol outdoor in a public place is both uncommon and illegal, unless it is served at a table within the outdoor area of a licensed restaurant¹. Whether the police take action against persons which are drinking outside varies by the situation. When it comes to distributing alcohol without a licence, the police will most certainly take action to stop it when or if discovered.

Legal regulations and laws

The Alcohol Act is a part of the legislation that to a great extent affects people living in the streets. The fact that (some) homeless people do not have a private place, makes people exposed to the public in private situations. Drinking – and being drunk –in public places is however closely linked to vagrancy.

¹ The Alcohol Act, § 8-9: It is illegal to drink or serve alcohol in common public places, like street, square, road, park or other public location.

The following paragraphs explain the legislation which regulates access and use of public space. The account is limited to the laws which most commonly affect homeless people and the most vulnerable persons who spend time in the streets and public places. Until 1970 vagrancy was prohibited in Norway (Act of Vagrancy, Panhandling and Drunkenness from 1900). The first violations were fined. By repeated violations the offender was sentenced to prison and the toughest and “incurable” was punished with imprisonment at hard labour. In 1970 the paragraph about vagrancy was abolished. Being without a fixed abode was no longer an offence.

But the Vagrancy Act itself remained until 2005 (abolition effective from 2006). The most important – and debated – result from abolishing the Vagrancy Act, is that begging became legal. The Criminal Act was amended to replace some of the regulations that were abolished. The intention with the amendments is to prohibit and prevent *organised* begging and *organised* prostitution. Prostitution is legal in Norway. But it is illegal to “by violence, threats, abuse of vulnerable situations or other undue exploitation of a person for a) prostitution or other sexual purpose, b) forced labour and forced services, including begging.” (Criminal Act § 224)

To get acceptance for legalising of begging, the different Police districts should be given the authorisation to adopt stricter regulations in the Police statutes. Oslo Police district has proposed paragraphs which are stricter against begging and prostitution than the Criminal Law. The proposal has been on hearing. Some bodies entitled to comment, particularly the NGOs, has pinpointed that the proposed paragraphs might hit certain groups, like foreign beggars and the most vulnerable women in the sex business. The proposal has not been passed and it is not effective.

A third Act, which to a great extent imposes itself on the life homeless persons, is the Pharmaceutical Act, which criminalise production, import, export, possession and dealing with drugs. Of course everyone who is caught in breaking the law will be punished. However, and in spite of the official drug policy which aims at “hitting the men behind” which make the profit, the prisons are filled up by the poor and miserable drug users (Christie and Bruun 2003). Later I will show how violation of the drug paragraphs was applied as an argument for physically moving the drug users “out of sight”.

The over all and general legal regulation of public space is to be found in the Criminal Act § 10 about public place and public act. Definition of public place is very wide. A public act is defined by being performed “presence of a larger number of persons, or when it easily might be observed and is observed from a public place.” Besides specifications like the ones mentioned above, the definition of what is to be considered as violation of public order is rather diffuse. The question is; who is to define public order and even more important, who is to define what is disturbance of the public peace and order?

One important question to be dealt with is whether homeless persons have the same access to public, included semi public, places as the population in general. For many homeless persons it might not be a clear distinction between use of public places for the activities they are designed for, and to use public place for activities usually considered as private and intimate tasks and activity. Particularly rough sleepers will need to conduct what is generally perceived as private tasks in public spaces. In this way they are bringing the private sphere into the public. Going to sleep is perhaps the most private, intimate – and vulnerable – moments in a person´s life. Sleeping in the public spaces might be regarded as the ultimate way of being private in public places and, opposite, bringing the public sphere into the private life. There are also other tasks conducted by homeless people, which are not common activity among the general public. Begging is an illustrative example of such activities. Although it is legal in Norway, it is highly disputed and stigmatising.

The paper focuses upon homeless people sleeping rough or staying in night shelters for homeless people, defined as shelters where the person has to spend the day or part of the day outside. The group is in accordance with the ETHOS – European Typologies of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion – category “roofless” (Edgar & Meert 2005). ETHOS consists of four main – conceptual – categories of homelessness and housing exclusion. In addition to the one already mentioned, roofless, the other three are houseless, insecure housing and inadequate housing.

Conceptualising homelessness

The first national survey of homeless in Norway employed a definition of homelessness that later have been widely used and has almost obtained a formal status. In short it says that a person is homeless if he/she is without a rented or abode and if the person is in one of the following situations: stays temporarily with relatives and friend, is in prison or institution and are due to release/discharge within two months, stays in temporary lodging or is without a place to stay.

The definition is clearly linked to positions and situations a person stays in. The concept of homelessness is however linked to certain characteristics of a person. The understanding of homelessness has inherited features from the homeless person defined by the Vagrancy Act, which criminalised homelessness and made the vagrant subject of legal prosecution. The debate about legalising begging and, when made legal, discussions about being tough on certain kinds of aggressive begging, the defender of legalising points to the danger of prosecuting certain groups and not the act itself.

A study in Oslo

The empirical basis for this paper is a study among rough sleepers in Oslo, the capitol of Norway. With 550.000 inhabitants Oslo is among the smaller capitols in Europe but the largest city in Norway. The surrounding municipalities included, the capitol area counts 1.5 million people. The municipality of Oslo stretches over a large area including suburbs and woodlands in the outskirts of the municipality. The fields and woodlands are popular

leisure and recreation space. It is also used by homeless people, who settle in the fields for – mostly – shorter periods. However, the majority of rough sleepers and people in overnight shelters stay in the city centre and they seemingly use a rather small part of the city.

The paper is organised in three parts in addition to the introduction. The first part presents studies concerning roofless people in Norway and Oslo. The second part accounts for the methods and data collection. The third and most extensive part presents and analyses the findings.

2. Recent studies of roofless people

This chapter describes four recent studies about homelessness or studies concerning homelessness. One is a large scale national survey. Two are smaller investigations carried out in Oslo. The fourth is a study of recruitment to the experienced and well settled group of drug users in the city centre after an police action towards the group.

A census carried out in week 48 in 2005 found that the total figure of homeless people in Norway is 5.5000 (Hansen et al. 2006). The figure is equal to 1.2 persons per 1000 inhabitants. The census counted 500 persons in Norway in the position of ETHOS definition of “roofless” during that particular week. Between 110 and 120 stayed in Oslo. This is probably minimum figures (Hansen et al 2006).

The survey was carried out by the support services. To be registered as homeless the person had to be in contact with services or institutions listed among the informants during the observation week and, further, it implies that these informants had enough knowledge about the persons housing situation and identity to register him/her as homeless. It is further reason to believe that many in this group of homeless people mainly use low threshold services operated by voluntary actors/NGOs. Usually these services do not have sufficient information about the clients to be able to fill in the required data in the registration form. As a rule these service providers emphasize the client’s right to be anonym and that they do not “ask questions” about identity and other private matters².

Census among rough sleepers

A census among rough sleepers in Oslo during spring 2006 confirms that the national counting is not overestimating the numbers. The census is initiated by the authorities of Oslo and is carried through by municipal employees. The registration is based on a short interview guide asking whether the person has been sleeping rough during the last month, how often and for how long, the reason for sleeping rough, where the person stayed last night and where to stay the next night.

The census was carried out in March and April. The net sample, people who were in touch with the project team and identified themselves, includes 126 persons. 126 persons had slept outside one or more nights. 74 persons – 59 percent – had slept rough two weeks or longer. Of these 74 persons, one third had been offered a place to stay, “a roof over their head”. 18 percent had contacted the social services during the last month without being offered a place to stay. Half of the persons in the survey had no contact with the social services at all.

² The NGOs low threshold services confirmed that they as rule were not able to report on the clients in the form that was required for the census, like specific identification marks needed for checking on double counts.

A few notions should be made when comparing the national census of homelessness and the investigation about rough sleeping in Oslo. The numbers from the national study referred to above – counting 110 to 120 rough sleepers – include both people spending the night outside and people in overnight shelters (ETHOS roofless category). Actually the latter group, people in night shelters, constitutes the majority of the group. Virtually rough sleepers, the group comparable to the Oslo registration, amount to 25 persons in the national mapping. On the other hand, the national mapping was a cross section study of one week, while the Oslo mapping was carried out by the method of “searching” for rough sleepers during two months. The report from the Oslo survey states that there are probably some persons sleeping rough they did not reach³.

The third notion to be made is that the registrations were carried out at different times of the year. The national study was done in November/December 2005 and the Oslo registration in February and March the next year. It is difficult to judge if and to what extent the difference in time has an impact on the result. If one presumes that rough sleeping varies by temperature and weather it should not make a big difference. The last date in November the average temperature was minus 4.2, the average in March was minus 3.3 (minimum temperatures were far below) and in April the average was on the plus with a maximum of 13 degrees. There were no changes in the services for homeless people during the period. Such changes, if there were any, might have affected the number of people sleeping rough. A winter night shelter set up by local authorities was at service at both periods.

Mapping beggars

There has been paid increasing interest in the group of rough sleepers in Oslo during the last years. The investigation among rough sleepers in Oslo described above is one indication. City Mission in Oslo made a survey among the beggars in the centre of Oslo in the same period (spring 2006). The aim of the investigation is, on the basis of information from the interviews with beggars, to report on and hence offer alternative activity to begging.

During the last couple of years there have also been recurring public debates on what is said to be an increase in number of beggars in Oslo. Like in other Nordic cities, there is a comprehension that Oslo attracts poor people from Southern and Eastern Europe, or an alternative scope, Oslo is an attractive cite for organised begging by people who are less in need and who make a large scale business out of it. The number of beggars probably increased before begging was legalised in 2006. The figure might also have expanded further as a result of decriminalisation of begging. There is no doubt that foreign speaking people begging for money is rather visible in the urban landscape, but there are no available figures showing the extent of this group or a rise in numbers.

³ Oslo commune, Bydel St. Hanshaugen / Oslo Municipality, City district of St. Hanshaugen

The City Mission project was in contact with 74 persons. Among these there was a group of foreigners who could not communicate and some of the other interviews were not completed. The net sample consists of 63 interviews. The vast majority was ethnic Norwegians. Most of them were homeless (City Mission 2006). The study is not quite clear on the informants contact with the social services or the services for homeless persons.

There has been a growth in the services for drug addict and rough sleepers in Oslo and other larger cities since 2000. Both NGOs and the municipalities have established field nursing stations, which is low threshold health care specialising on wounds caused by injections and other illnesses which are common among people with addictions and unstable or no place to live. The Salvation Army opened a Street Hospital one and a half year ago. Another NGO opened up “nursing on wheels”, an outreach health care service. The day centres (see next chapter) – food and sanitary services – were also established a few years ago.

As also Pedro Cabrera (2006) points to in his paper, the services and kindness from the public might paradoxically serve to prolong the time spent on the streets. It makes it easier to manage as rough sleeper and in the end, to survive in the streets.

A master dissertation in criminology by Camilla Lied (2005) about beggars and street artists should also be mentioned. Lied finds that in spite of important differences between the two groups there are similarities. Both groups spend more time in public places than most people and their ways of occupying and using public place is considered to be semi legal although not illegal. Both the street artist and the beggars talk about their activity as a “job”.

“An open drug scene”

Until lately (defines as less than a year) there has been very little public discussion framing the theme of homelessness as *rough sleeping* in Oslo or in Norway. There is a strong opinion that due to the cold climate, rough sleeping is very hard and unbearable during large parts of the year⁴. The services rough sleepers use is primarily aimed at drug addicts. The public discussions are centred around beggars and drug users in the urban landscape and not on homelessness. Themes from the discussion about begging are already mentioned. One single episode or case concerning drug user’s visibility in the city centre is of importance for the questions discussed in this paper and is shortly outlined in the next paragraphs; named as the police action against “Plata”.

A group of veteran users of opiates had for some years settled in an open space named “Plata” near Oslo central railway station (Oslo S). “Plata” was a market place for drug dealing, particularly for heroin, but also all kinds of other illegal drugs. The group, which

⁴ The investigation by Oslo local authorities will probably evoke debates and demand for political action and the publication of the report may be hold back until there is a “political answer” to its findings.

was cored by older and exhausted drug addicts, was considered to be quite visible in the urban landscape. “Plata” is, however, a rather small spot and it is reasonable to question to what extent the group was exposed to the general public, or opposite, how exposed the public was to the activity at “Plata”.

During spring 2004 a debate developed around the harm *the visibility* of the group might cause. One of the main arguments was that “Plata” served as recruitment base for curious and adventurous teenagers who occasionally visited the city centre, but it could be even more attractive for youngsters already living on the edge of society. The debate was fronted by the head of Oslo Police Force, who also emphasised the illegal activity of drug dealing, and politicians in the City Council. One morning in early June 2004 the group at “Plata” was physically removed by police forces. The action was carried out with full press coverage. After a short while the group and the activity settled two blocs from “Plata” in a rather busy street, “Skippergata”. The group appears more scattered, but the persons are still quite visible as a group.

It should also be mentioned that the removal from Plata was covered by all the main media. It was reported as a rather spectacular event. At one point some of the persons in the streets asked for a clear border between them and “Plata” and how near they should go. The police draw a white line in the street, which of course became part of the “spectacle”.

Sandberg & Pedersen (2005) analyse the public debate before the police action towards “Plata”. They also interviewed 30 young persons contacted in the city centre during the summer 2004. Further, the study includes interviews with earlier drug addicts, police officers and employees in the outreach branch of social services in Oslo, as well as observations in the area. The main findings in the study is that the arguments used to split up “Plata”, which they name as an “open drug scene”, was not valid and did not reflect real problems. The high numbers of young people in risk of being recruited into addiction of opiates, which was forwarded by different actors, had no base in reality. “Plata” had no attraction to young people; it was connected with low social status, and there were many other sources where young people could buy illegal drugs. Young people buy drugs from persons they know. Sandberg & Pedersen conclude that there may have been reasons for closing down “Plata”, but the action cannot be justified by the arguments furthered in advance.

The police force and local politicians was not the only actors in the debates. NGOs also participated and although they wanted another solution than the police and politicians, all parties seemed to agree upon that it was a problem that there was such a “visible and exhausted group in Norway”, as Sandberg & Pedersen point out. But the agreement ended at this state. The NGOs argued for better care and services to prevent further damages and health problems for the group in focus. And eventually, the arguments against the visibility and poorness of the group was grabbed by the neighbouring merchants and tourist businesses which gave the arguments “their own framing” (Sandberg & Pedersen).

The public debate, the action towards “Plata” is all about drug policies and prevention. Homelessness is not a theme. The use of public space is an underlying theme, but this question is not clearly pronounced. The action was justified by the fear of “Plata” being a recruitment base and the fact that the activity of drug dealing is illegal.

One might question whether the politicians and the police would have carried out the action against “Plata” if the people in question had not been members of such a visibly poor and exhausted group. The white line in the street, although it was drawn at the request of the street people themselves, is a visible symbol of how homeless are denied or have restricted access to public space.

The interviews and data collected for the analysis in this paper show that “Plata”, and hence “Skippergata”, the new site where the group settled after the police action, is a place rough sleepers visit frequently.

3 Methodology and data collection⁵

The data collected for this paper is based upon interviews with homeless people either rough sleeping at time of the interview or they had long lasting experience with rough sleeping and still frequented the places where rough sleepers go. We completed six interviews, three of them were actually sleeping rough at the time. The other three persons had a place to stay, but all had been living outside for many years. One of the persons was interviewed twice and this person also guided us to some of the places people sleep. One of the informants (persons we have interviewed) is woman and five are men. The informants are between 30 years and in the middle of the fifties. We also made shorter interviews with two other persons – a woman and a man – but these are incomplete. In addition we had more informal talks with other persons, e.g. with by passers when we made observations and mates of the interview persons, which is also a part of the data set.

We had a meeting with two employees at the outreach drug prevention services in Oslo. The first observation was carried out with the outreach drug prevention services. Later observations are done by the project team alone, except for the one in company with a homeless informant.

All interviews with homeless people are carried out in the Salvation Army day centre for drug users (further on SA day centre), with one exception: We met one of the informants in the city centre for the purpose of getting some guidelines about where rough sleepers stay in the city, places to sleep etc. (mentioned above). This person is also interviewed at the SA day centre. To get in touch with homeless informants we started at the SA day centre one morning sitting by a table having a cup of coffee. The SA day centre is a café serving free foods and drinks. The facilities are simple with space for around 60 persons. In connection to the café there is a possibility to have a shower, to shave and to have a limited amount of cloths washed. The staff may also assist with practical tasks, like seeing medical services. A field nursing service is located in the building. We carried out interviews with two employees at SA day centre.

We visited the SA day centre at three different occasions and stayed there for around five hours each time. The place was always very busy. On an average day between 150 and 200 persons visit the service every day. On the busiest days there may be as many as 400 persons. An employee at the SA day centre estimates that half of the visitors are homeless, not necessary rough sleepers, but in the sense that they don't have a fixed abode. Many people go there to meet friends and they might get help with different kind of problems, like medical care or simply having a shower. There are two other places like the SA day centre in Oslo. According to one of the employees at SA day centre, drug addicts, and homeless people in particular, partly organise their days in accordance with

⁵ Most of the data collection is carried through by two master students in sociology at University of Oslo. Katja Johannessen has participated inn all interviews with homeless people and employees at the services for homeless/ drug addicts and in the observations. Maja Flåto has taken part in the greater part of the interviews and observations. Katja Johannessen has taken the photos.

the opening hours of the services offered and the day centres. This is also confirmed by people at the outreach services.

The first day at the SA centre a person approached us after about one hour. He was a well articulated man in his fifties and the oldest person in the informant group. The next person also approached us. Later we have been led to other persons by employees at the SA centre (one informant) and by other informants (three informants). Other people, which we had shorter conversations with, approached us or they joined us while we were interviewing or talking to their friends or acquaintances. We also posed questions shop assistants and security guards and others simply to get information. But we do not list this as interviews.

Methodological and ethical considerations

Informants without an address are often recruited to research interviews by voluntariness or through the services for homeless people. In this study we used the voluntary method and “snowballing”; we were connected to others by the informants we already had contact with. People who volunteer as participants in research often have a specific reason for doing so and might not represent an average person of their group. They might for example have a message or something they want to inform about. This is also the case with our informants. They had complaints about the municipal services and more specifically, the social services and housing allocation. A few also had explanations and views about why people slept rough. Others wanted simply to tell their story. The interviews followed a questionnaire, but to get answers to our questions it sometimes required a conversation along a pathway with several circuitous.

The theme of the interview also made it easy to go astray. The focus of the study is in short how roofless people organise their daily life. The use of public place is an important part of their daily life. Talking about every day life and what we do during a day is difficult for all of us. For this reason studies of what people actually do and how much time they use on different kind of activities during a specific time, is often organised as diary studies⁶. There is no reason why it should be easier for people living in the streets to make account of their daily tasks than it is for “ordinary” people.

Two of the employees from the outreach services stated that after working with drug addicts and people in the streets for a while, you build up a silent knowledge about the different groups you meet in the streets, which among other things, enabled them to pick out young people who do not appear as drug users and rough sleepers. According to the informants in the outreach services they are still young and cool and able to find a place to sleep with a girl/boyfriend or with other friends and acquaintances. We observed a very few young persons at the SA day centre and the youngest person in the survey among beggars in Oslo is 24 years. The average age is considerably above that; the majority is between 30 and 40 years.

⁶ See also the paper from Hungary where diary studies are one of the methods (Györi 2006).

Also rough sleepers and homeless people build up a story of silent knowledge. Silent knowledge is among other characterized by being difficult to describe and pass on. The silent knowledge about living and surviving in the streets is difficult to grasp for a researcher and outsider also for this reason.

How do we know that people are telling the truth? This is a recurring discussion with people working with homeless, people with addiction and people in extreme social situations. According to employees in services for these groups, they are telling “new” stories in different setting or they have different ways of “selling in” their stories. To “sell” a story may also be a strategy of survival. Studies shows that long term clients are learning different ways of negotiating with the social service officers, as a mean of achieving assistance (Børner Stax 2004). Telling the “truth” or not, is a general topic in research interviews. Also people in power and other interviewee might chose to held back information and make a choice about what the would like to inform about.

We were not primarily interested in the persons “life story” and we had nothing to offer in return. In this respect our contact with the informants had another nature than the relationship to the services. On the other hand, it might very well be that we have missed important information and points.

A last remark, but a very important consideration, is how to use and describe some of the information we got. This might be information about good places to sleep, which the informants either want to keep to themselves or within smaller groups, and places where they are allowed to stay by the “good will” of the person(s) in charge, or the person(s) in charge turn a blind eye to what is going on. Oslo is a small city and publishing a photo of a “good” place to sleep might lead to that homeless are denied access to the place.

Homeless informants, a brief profile

In the following I shall give a brief profile of the six homeless people we completed the interviews with. As mentioned, not all of them are homeless at the time for the interview. The short sketches of the informants account for merely facts about age, experiences with rough sleeping and homelessness and background if the gave such information. Opinions and particular experiences the informants told about are presented in the part about Living in the streets.

IP1 (male): We met IP1 at the SA day centre twice and we made an additional appointment to meet him in the city where he would show us the places he frequently spent time. He is a man in his early thirties. IP1 grew up in the North of Norway. He started to drink alcohol at the age of eleven. When he first moved to Oslo in 1992 he had a job and worked a lot the first years. At the same time his use of drugs accelerated. The last years, from 2000 to 2006, he has lived in another city and had recently returned to Oslo. He had not registered at the social services in Oslo, it was on his agenda during the

two weeks we were in touch with him, but he never did so, and therefore he was not entitled to other than emergency assistance.

IP1 had not had a home of his own in many years (since before he moved to the other city). He had long time experience of sleeping rough; he slept outside every night during our contact period. Earlier he had lived at friends, relatives and acquaintances, but they seemed to have been used up and were no longer alternatives.

IP2 (male): IP2 is in the middle of his fifties and the oldest persons among the informants. He tells that he years ago had his own firm and a family in a smaller town. The firm went bankrupt. At a point of time he developed a serious drinking problem and later an addiction to opiates. It is unclear when he lost the contact with his family – it seemed to have faded away – and when he became homeless. IP2 has been homeless continuously for eight years. During those years he has lived in squatters, in temporary places and been sleeping rough.

IP2 has used the FA day centre and other services offered by voluntary actors, he specifically mentions the Blue Cross, during his period as homeless. Obviously he knows quite a few visitors at the FA centre. At the time of data collection he rents a cabin outside Oslo.

IP3 (male): He passes 50 years autumn 2006. IP3 is on “pharmaceutical rehabilitation” (methadone). He was one of the early starters on “methadone program” and although it required that one should have a fixed abode to get on this program, IP3 was never offered a place of his own. He has been homeless for eleven years and spent the nights in different kind of temporary lodgings and hostels. He has been rough sleeping only a few times when he did not manage to find a solution. IP3 had at the time of the interview been offered a municipal rented flat. Although he found it pretty small – 35 square meters – he had accepted and was going to move in. IP3 has disability pension and therefore secured a certain income each month.

IP4 (female): Between 40 and 50 years. For the time being she has a flat which she got hold of at the private rented market. IP4 has been sleeping rough for several periods. The longest continuous period of rough sleeping is three years. Her hands distinguish themselves from an otherwise well dressed and neat appearance. She explains that it is scars from frostbite she got at periods of sleeping outside. IP4 says that she has “always” been a drug addict. But she has had a couple of longer “clean” periods. In those periods she has attended school and studies and for a while her children lived with her. But she does not have many friends or any family who know where she is.

IP5 (male): A man in his forties marked by years in the open air. He says that he has not slept in a bed for over a year. IP5 has two main sources of income. He sells “=Oslo”, a street magazine sold by homeless people. The other source of income is begging. IP5 hardly leaves the inner circle of Oslo centre.

IP6 (male): Age 30. He is educated practical nurse and worked for some years at a nursery home for elderly people. He has been homeless for many years. IP6 receives regular social support. He works at “The Job” and “Paid as deserved”. The former is organised by Salvation Army and the latter by City Mission, both on the basis of day to day work and payment in cash at the end of the day. IP6 plays football and is going to the tournament for homeless footballers in South Africa later this year. He has been taken into a program of “pharmaceutical rehabilitation” (methadone) starting in the autumn 2006.

The main empirical data is interviews with six homeless persons and observations at locations in the city centre. Interviews with three persons in Oslo outreach services and two employees in the Salvation Army are also important. In addition we had shorter talks both with homeless persons and others. The perspective of the study is the one of roofless people.

4 Living in the streets

This section presents the results from interviews with homeless people and the other informants, talk and information passed on by others and from observations. When analysing the data some central features of the life in the streets of Oslo manifest itself. The six interviews with roofless persons in particular describe – sometimes implicitly – how life is when the borders between the private and public sphere are erased. Two vital issues may be pointed at:

One issue is routines versus break ups: How homeless persons organising the day and night by routine versus constant break ups. The interviewee expresses an urge for being on the move, which seems to be triggered primarily by external forces like being asked to move by security guards, police or cold weather. The daily life is centred at the question of how to get money. The majority of people living in the streets are addicted to illegal drugs and are constantly in need of a considerable amount of money. Among the beggars interviewed by the City Mission, 95 percent said they needed money to buy illegal drugs. Rough sleepers are also very poor. Some have a disability pension, but the pensions are often small because of short or no time in employment⁷. Some of the persons we have met receive social support, other had nothing but the income from begging and other, legal or illegal, activity.

The other vital issue is about conflicts versus alliances: Having “contacts”, also expressed as taking care of the “good will” from individuals, makes life easier. This might also be a matter of survival. On the other hand there are also conflicts between rough sleepers and others, including persons that sometimes might be useful contacts. There are also conflicts among the street people themselves.

The presentation consists to a great extent on accounts and quotes from the informants. This section is organised in three parts: The first part is about defining the places – where roofless people generally spend time and where to find places to sleep, with a section about the shelters for homeless people, second; routines versus brake ups as an important element in the daily life, and third; conflicts and alliances between roofless people and the surroundings and among rough sleepers themselves.

Defining the places

Many rough sleepers and people living in the streets spend a considerable amount of their time within rather limited boundaries in the city centre. The east end of the city centre is marked by the central railway station – Oslo S – and, a bit further east, by the river which by tradition divides the city into the working class area in the east and the more upper class area in the west. Although the socio-economic division is not that obvious any more, the eastern parts of the inner city has gone through different stages of gentrification, it is

⁷ Right to pension and particularly the amount of money a person receives is measured by the total length of employment and amount of income.

still a notably border. The SA day centre is places well behind the border at the eastern part of inner city. The corresponding services by City Mission and local authorities are sited on the west side of the river. One is very near to “Skippergata” (and “Plata”).

The core of the city centre stretches from Oslo S (Central railway station) up the main street to the royal castle, the nearby streets and down to the waterfront. Street people, which may be a more precise term since not all of them are homeless or at least they are not homeless all the time, largely move within a rectangle including those parts mentioned and some busy streets nearby. Sandberg & Pedersen (2005) divide the space used by the heavy users of opiates, “the open drug scene”, and the places used by young people into two separated places. They define the place along the river as the domain of the young. According to our findings the borders are not that well marked. I do not contradict the assertion that young persons, who socially distant themselves from the group at “Skippergata” (earlier “Plata”) also keep a physical distance. But the riversides are also used as places to sleep by older rough sleepers. It seems though as the experienced drug users, primarily people who inject opiates, keep to one side and the younger to the other side of the river.

The distance along the main street, a particularly busy space around the middle of the street and a space around the west end of the street are the main cites for begging. According to our findings drug users and beggars spend much of the day time within the rectangle which marks the core of the city centre. These are the places where it is possible to get money and to buy drugs. This is confirmed by the study of City Mission (Kirkens Bymisjon 2006). Foreign beggars, however, use a much larger part of the inner city (own observations).

During two hours of observation outside the city centre – at a smaller shopping area (Majorstuen) and outside a shopping centre (Ullevål stadion) – we counted two beggars at the first place and a beggar and two musicians at the second location. These were probably foreigners. But selling the street paper “=Oslo”, which has existed for a year and a half in Oslo, has expanded the area for earning money among ethnic Norwegians living in the streets.

The places where rough sleepers spend time might to some extent be divided into places to sleep and places to stay during daytime. The latter includes how and where to conduct *activity* in connection to personal hygiene, the get food, to bay drugs, to get money and to socialise. Places to sleep and places to stay during daytime are however not always separated.

The places to sleep our informants told about are to a great extent cited at the west end of the city centre. Observation on one of these places, under a heavily busy road, showed a simple settlement of cardboards and plastic bags, but there were no people at the place at that time. But when it comes to places to sleep the circle is wider and the alternatives more diverse than where to conduct daily activities. One of the informants says that some

homeless people might stay for periods in the woodlands surrounding the city. This is confirmed by studies of homelessness (Dyb 2004; Solheim 2000; Fodstad 1996). The woodlands are partly owned by private persons and by the municipality. According to this informant people sometimes have a “silent” agreement with the landowner that allow them to stay and set up temporary shelters. The agreement may for example involve working in the woods. “They can stay as long as the shelters are not destroyed”, he adds. Two of the informants also have had and have at the time of data collection places of temporary settlement outside the inner rectangle.

The most important feature of a good place to sleep is provision of heat. Building sites are frequently used as places to spend the night. Because of the harsh climate building sites are warmed up to preserve the materials. We were told about one specific place at the west end which was used at the moment. One of the construction workers confirmed that he frequently observed people, who presumably spent the night there, leaving early in the morning. Among these there was one “regular” and others more occasional.

People also sleep outside, either under the open air or with a minimum of shelter above their head, like in a doorway or at the underground entrances. IP5, who has a long standing experience of rough sleeping, seems to have a good overview of places to sleep, meaning places with warm sources. By the time of the interview he had spent the nights by a warm fan on the top of an underground/railway station at the west end together with other rough sleepers. This spot have been pointed out by others as a place with warm air from a large fan and a reasonable chance for not being disturbed, although it is in the middle of a busy interchange, but still enough out of sight of the by passers. There is no roof or any kind of shelter and the place is not much suited during the winter or at rainy nights. Some nights it is occupied by many sleeping persons. Last winter IP5 spent most nights at the heated steps above the pavement in front of a large business building (mentions the business and address). He has also used other heated doorways. He also sleeps at the underground entrances and in parking houses. Both are mentioned by other informants as places where people sleep.



The warm fan at the National theatre underground/ railway station; a place to sleep in good weather.

At the first and third meeting with IP1 he had spent the nights at one of the underground entrances in the city centre and, before the second meeting, by a warm fan at a wall by the old castle in the back of a green area. Heated parking houses is frequently mentioned as places to sleep, but both IP1 and others point to that the risk of being chased away by the guards is quite high. “When I see the guards coming, I leave. They don’t walk, they come in cars”. Both IP1 and others emphasise that the chances of being left in peace varies from one parking house to another.

IP4 preferred to sleep in open spaces because “it is safer”. For a while she slept regularly at a graveyard, but like IP1 she also walked about during nights. She however emphasises the difference between summer and winter: “In the summer you can sleep outside at nights, but in the cold winter nights you have to keep moving”.

Parks seem to be less used as alternatives for sleeping and as places to stay. We asked a gardener in one of Oslo’s largest parks, Frognerparken, if he ever found persons sleeping on the benches in the morning, which actually are among the very few benches we could find that are suited for lying down. The gardener could not remember finding a sleeping person in the park in the morning, but this of course is no proof of that it ever happens.



Old benches in Frogner park, suited for lying down but not used by homeless people



Transparent tram stop with uncomfortable places to rest

Warm fans at doorways, underground entrances and other heated courses as described above are not suited for settling down. Although some persons, like IP5, have their own doorway at least for periods of time, or like others, sleep regularly at the same construction site for weeks and even months, this is not places to settle. They are merely a “good spot to sleep”.

IP4, when sleeping at the graveyard, did not keep her things there. Empty containers, often at the harbour and squatters are used as places for more permanent settlement from time to time. This is also places to stay at day time. IP6 stays at some deserted work sheds with friends. The sheds are furnished with things they have found in containers and other places. They have “everything but water and electricity” and it is the best place he

has stayed in for a long time. It would be a good thing to get electricity supply and live there during the winter, he says. IP2, who has been a rough sleeper for eight years, states that he had his best days in this period sharing a container outside the city centre with a friend.

While good places to sleep are defined by supply of heat and the chances of being left in peace by the security guards, places to spend the day are largely defined by the need of income and the opening hours at the day centres (like the SA day centre). When it comes to places to secure an income, IP5 seems to have a rather conscious opinion about what he considers as “his own” places both to sleep and beg for money.

At least four of the interview persons use illegal drugs and the main market place is Skippergata (one is on “methadone” and information about the last person is uncertain). Their regular visits to Skippergata are not a topic any of them like to dwell on. There might be at least two explanations. One is that it is so obviously a main activity; buying drugs is the prime aim of the efforts of getting money. The other explanation is that buying drugs is an illegal activity and therefore is no topic of discussion or conversation with outsiders. The police action against “Plata” has also underlined that this activity is both unacceptable and unwanted use of public place.

Next to Oslo S, on the other side of “Plata”, is one of Oslo largest and most visited shopping malls, Oslo City. This shopping mall has for many years been known for being one of the most hostile places towards drug addicts and other people the centre manager and shop owners have define as unwanted. The shopping mall is also known to have the roughest guards in the city. Our informants, including the outreach services in Oslo, confirm that people who might have an appearance indicating that he/she is, or has been, a drug user or rough sleeper will be chased away. It should also be noted that Oslo City does not have any places to sit down in the common areas of the mall. There are no benches or benches outside the restaurants and cafés.

The shopping area around Oslo City and the railway station, Oslo S has expanded during the last six-seven years. The interior of Oslo S is growing into a shopping mall. Common area has gradually been taken over by shops and restaurants. Beside privatisation of the common space by expansion of the shopping and restaurant area, the waiting hall has a rather hostile attitude towards homeless people. There are no benches suited for lying down. Oslo S, and the central bus station nearby, has chairs separated by armrests. At the bus station there are some resting places shaped in elegant, but rather unfriendly stone material.



Chairs at Oslo S, the central railway station



At the central bus station

According to one of the security guards at Oslo S they observe very few homeless or drug users in and near the hall after the action against “Plata” in 2004. If the guards discover people who sleep at the station area, they are instructed to expel the person. Homeless persons are however “allowed” to use the luggage boxes for travellers. In Oslo it is still common to have an open left-luggage area where people lock up their luggage without going through security control. Some of the boxes are unlocked. According to the guard they allow people who they believe are homeless to keep their things in the boxes, meaning that they don’t empty the boxes. This practice seems to be on the borders of the occupational instructions of the security company.



Left-luggage boxes at Oslo S are used by homeless people



The left-luggage area is closely monitored

As shown in the picture to the right, the left-luggage area is closely monitored by surveillance cameras. But although it might not be in accordance with the work instructions to let people keep their things in unlocked boxes for days and weeks, it seems to be “silently” accepted by the guards. Both IP1 and IP4 say they frequently keep their things in luggage boxes. IP4 tells that she once had three boxes (not at Oslo S) when the guards asked her to remove her things. IP4 expresses that she understands that the guards had to take action and says that she negotiated with them to get a dead line for when to have her things removed.

From what is told by the six interview persons and others persons we have spoken with, most homeless people and rough sleepers in particular frequently go either to the SA day centre or to one of the alternatives. The centres are important places to get food, to shower and to do the laundry. It is also places to meet friends and acquaintances, to read newspapers or simply to be in a social setting. To visit “ordinary” cafés and restaurants seems unlikely. A person we speak briefly with at the SA day centre, which has had his own flat for seven years and who has been on “methadone” in all these years, states that the centre is one of the few alternatives he has. He is let into some pubs, but they will not let him sit with a cup of coffee and he feels forced to buy alcohol. Sometimes he is allowed to sit in a patisserie in his neighbourhood. “But actually I have few alternatives beside Urtegata”, he states (Urtegata: address of SA day centre). None of the interview persons or others mentions restaurants, café or shops when asked about places they stay at or go to.

The study, illustrate by these examples, indicates that homeless people to a considerable extent is limited in their use of public space. There are quite a few places they are denied access because of their appearance; i.e. they look like rough sleepers or/and “heavy drug users”. Probably the combination of being marked by a rough life and long periods of taking drugs and drinking alcohol are the determining factor. It is sufficient to have a certain appearance, like the person quoted in the last example, to be denied access to public, but privately owned, places like restaurants, cafés and to some extent also shops.

Shelter and privacy

Marie Loison (2006) discusses the possibility of “making a home” when being homeless. She makes a division between the private place which is visible for the eye of the public, like the Metro, and the hidden places, like informal shelters under a bridge. Contrary to the visible spots, the latter makes it possible to build a home.

A couple of the interviewee tells about informal and temporary settlements which they come close to talk about as a private place. IP2 emphasises the time in a container with a friend as one of his best periods. IP6 and his friends has furnished the deserted work mans sheds and hope to keep it during the winter. These solutions seems to be rare and merely a result of good luck.

Traditionally roofless persons have been offered a room or a bed in a shelter. All interview persons have experiences with living in hostels and shelters for homeless people, which are the usual alternatives roofless people are offered. Oslo has hostels both run by private bodies and the authorities. The hostels (“hospits”), both in Oslo and other municipalities, have since back in the middle of the 1970ies had very bad reputation. It was accused of being a highly overcharged and very poor service. The accusations were also proved right by different investigations, by media, municipal employees⁸ and the authorities. Around 2000 Oslo started what was called “clean up” work. Only hostels with

⁸ Employees in the outreach services published two reports through their union, Norsk Kommuneforbund.

“quality contracts” with the authorities should receive clients and there should be regular inspections. Application of quality contracts were spread to other municipalities by the state authorities. At the same time the state authorities recommended to reduce the application of shelter. The term “hospits” (hostel) was replaced by the term “temporary services”.

The demand for temporary rooms and beds did not, however, seem to disappear. Some of the private hostels owners, in particular those who did not qualify for a “quality contract”, transformed the business into blocks of bedsits. A report by the well fare services in Oslo municipality describes the conditions in the majority of these blocks of bedsits as being very similar to the former hostels (“hospits”) (Oslo commune 2005). The main difference is that the people living there are tenants. They have a tenancy, although short term, and are by that not counted as homeless.

It should also be mentioned that the drug treatment branch of the welfare services in Oslo run their own blocks of bedsits with short term tenancies. All six interview persons have several stays at hostels and shelters. When talking about the shelters and hostels, they do not discriminate between the private and municipal blocks of bedsits and ordinary shelters. They consequently use the term “hospits”. The informants express mutual opinions about them: They are of low quality and not necessarily considered as much safer than the street. But there are also differing opinions on some aspects. One of the interview persons, IP3, usually stays at a hostel. IP3 has a small disability pension which means that he has to pay at least some of the expenses for the room or the bed, but pinpoints that he has always given priority to “sleep under roof”:

“I have never chosen to sleep outside to save money. I think it is important to have a roof over my head, to be able to lock the door and have a place to put things.”

The other five informants express that they have not chosen to sleep outside. But in their opinion the alternatives, hostels and shelters, is in many aspects not much better alternatives. They do not differ between private hostels and the staffed services offered by the local authorities: “These are drug traps with food service”, states IP6 talking about the municipal hostels.

IP4 states that she has been thrown out of several hostels because of opposing or breaking the rules. The general applied rules in hostels and shelters are probation against bringing pets, couples are not to share room, at some places a boy-/girlfriend are not let in as visitors and there are specific time limits for being let inside and – at the over night services – for leaving in the morning. The rules go quite far into regulation of what is considered as being private matters. This is pinpointed by IP5, who prefers to sleep outside when the alternative is shelters. He feels supervised at the shelters. He also finds it difficult to adjust to the rules. IP4 conclusion is that she in general lacks the ability to adjust to rules, rather than opposing to the rules as unreasonable.

Others mention that some of the hostels and shelters have thin walls, “like newspaper”, and there are no privacy. IP3, who regularly stays at the hostels, points out: “These places is a disgrace, you cannot live a normal life there”. An employee at the outreach services also emphasises that some of the hostels might not be a safer place than the street. IP1, who has stayed at hostels and shelters both in Oslo and other cities and towns, claims that there is no discrimination of who is let inside. At some hostels there are people with serious mental illness, which he sometimes finds rather scaring.

IP2 are reflecting over what kind of services homeless people are offered. Although he praises the SA café as a good place, he also pinpoints that for homeless people “those who are living outside, it is always low threshold whatever they are offered. [...] It is disputable whether we can call ourselves citizens of Oslo”.

In her study among homeless women in Stockholm for more than two years Annette Rosengren (2003) finds that many women who roofless refuse to adjust to the rules and often they do not have any contact with the social services. One explanation might be that the alternatives they are offered, with control from the services or lack of privacy in a shelter, does not offer more private space than provisional spots.

Routines versus brake ups

According to employees at the outreach services many of the homeless people, and drug addicts with a place to stay as well, organise the daily life by specific routines. The outreach services follow certain pathways and call on specific places where they expect to find the clients. The picture is however more complex. A couple of our informants have a rather habitual every day life. Others seem to have no routines at all.

IP5 and IP6 appear to have quite organised life. IP6 receive social support, but his days are spent to get enough money, which seems to be organised by some habits. One source of IP6 income is “The Job”. Although he does not go there every day, it is quite habitual. Before going to “The Job”, IP6 goes to the SA day centre to shower and have something to eat. The SA day centre opens at nine o’clock in the morning and “The Job” starts at ten. Accomplishing these tasks needs planning. He has to secure a drug dose for the morning to stay “healthy”⁹ during the morning hours, and this has to be arranged the night before. His mates, which he shares the sheds with, get money from begging. IP6 does not beg himself, although he does not go to “The Job” every day.

IP6 also points to another kind of routine: “I receive my social support at the local post office. They know me there.” IP6 has no identification papers. Other informants confirm that it is rather common not to have identification card among rough sleepers. People who receive pensions and benefits therefore go regularly to “their local” post office to withdraw money, where the officials know them.

⁹ The word used by the informants is ”friskmelding”, which literally means “report fit” or “take off the sick list”.

During the years as rough sleeper, IP5 has constantly moved around. He keeps all his belongings in a sack beside him all the time. He emphasizes that he moves between different places and keeps his things at his side. Although moving around, it turns out that IP5 has rather fixed routines. He has his “own street” where he begs and sells “=Oslo”. “I am among the lucky ones, who have my own street. And that is respected”. He sleeps during the nights, but not more than three or four hours: “I normally settle for the night at three or four in the morning and get up around seven.” IP5 frequently goes to the SA day centre to have a meal and a shower. IP5 also have “his places” where he can use the toilets. One of them is the employment office (Aetat), another is a specific restaurant within a fast food chain.

IP1 on the other hand states that he does not make plans: “I never plan my days but take things as they turn up. I start to plan things when I feel bad”. He does not have a cell phone or any fixed places. He meets friends when they occasionally go to the same places and sometimes they make appointments to meet later. At our second meeting he has arranged to watch a football match with a friend at a pub later that day. While talking about the appointment, however, he also expresses that it might not happen and other things might come around.

At our first meeting with IP1, he mourned about a bottle of whiskey he had found and had planned to sell. The bottle should have been his income and secure his drug dose at least for part the day. He had spent the night at one of the underground entrances:

“I looked after the bottle all night, hold it to my body. But there was this girl who had lied down at the same spot, set an injection, spread her things around. It was a mess. The security guards came and told us to move. When I woke up, the bottle slipped out of my hands and broke.”

The broken bottle changed his plans and when IP1 leaves the SA day centre he goes to the city centre to beg for money. IP1 earns his money in different ways. For example by assisting other people with injections, offering other kind of services (which he speaks about in vague phrases), selling things he find or “get hold of”, collecting bottles and begging. He also sleeps at different places and walks about in the night: “I have slept on asphalt and concrete for more than a month. [...] Most of the time I am awake, at the most I have walked about for nine days”. One explanation for what seems to be a complete lack of routines in IP1s daily life might be the short time he has spent in Oslo after being away for some years.

IP5 and IP6 on the one hand and IP1 on the other constitute the complete contrasts with regard to routines and anarchy in daily life. But although IP5 and IP6 have a certain order and routines, they also move around a lot. When they find a good place to stay or to sleep, they most certainly will have to move along sooner or later. IP6 hopes to keep the sheds during the winter but finds it strange that they are not chased away already. IP5 accounts

for different places he has used as his regular spot to sleep. He was chased from one doorway with warm fan because someone else had peed there. The over all impression is that there are very few places homeless people can settle down. If the shop owner, the security guard company or someone else in charge find signs of settlement, the “settler” will almost certainly be chased away sooner or later. All our interview persons strongly emphasises that one has to “behave” to be allowed to stay at a public place. The majority of the interview persons have no other than public or privatised public places to stay.

Conflicts and alliances

To be allowed to stay at place it is vital to “behave well”, as IP5 states: “It is important to have properly to keep the possibility to walk about”. Roofless people may also be chased away because they are at the wrong place, regardless of their behaviour. IP6 expresses surprise about that the authorities have not chased them away from the work mans sheds he occupies already. He finds it hard to believe that the authorities don’t know about them.

To behave well is not always enough and sometimes it does not make any difference at all. A well used term among all persons we have interviewed and spoken with is “being chased away” from public places. A common theme is how to avoid being chased by the police, by security guards, shop owners or others with a share of interest in specific public or privatized public places. The opinions among the interview persons differ and are contradictory. One explanation for the lack of coherent viewpoints is that they are comparing between “before” and “to-day” without a fixed starting point, which makes it difficult to grasp the meaning. IP6 emphasises that it has become easier to move around in Oslo the last years. His views are not entirely supported by others. Some of the informants also stresses that after the “Plata” action, they have to move along more and should not stay to long in one place.

Different persons also refer to different kind of experiences with security guards, police and other persons, which is another explanation for differing viewpoints. In a discussion among IP3 and two mates around a table at the SA day centre, IP3 states that he is always chased away by the guards and the police wherever he goes. One of the mates agrees, but the third person held another opinion. He does not feel that he is chased off from public places, but than “I behave properly and looks ok”, he adds. The conversation illustrates that the reason for being chased, how often on is chased away, from where and if the situation has became better or worse, are relative terms. IP3s mate credits *himself* for not being chased and clearly indicates that it is the persons own responsibility to avoid being chased, alternatively being allowed to stay at public places.

What the majority of the informants agree upon, is that security guards in general act tougher towards homeless people than the police. IP2 expresses a rather common opinion in this quote:

“When it comes to chasing people away, the private guards are the worst. They have a horrible mentality. They can bust you and hold you back. The connection between private guards and the police is scary. Police are what they are; you can also meet nice people there. The merchants look after their business – that is understandable”.

What IP2 also quite clearly expresses, regardless of whether they behave worse or better than the other parties in question, is that the security guards have no legal right to act as they do. Their actions seems to have no legitimate founding among people living in the streets, whereas it is more or less accepted that the police has a job to do and the merchants also have legal interests to look after. On the other hand, IP2 expresses the police treat people living in the streets different from other people

“The say it is equality before the law. We who walk about all the time have no legal protection. You risk that they keep you in remand longer that they have the right to and you may not have your rights quoted. [...] To “recover in prison” is just a plus, a bonus of the misery. If the authorities could have prevented it, they would have done so”.

The security guards are also divided into different sorts. As stated above, there are some places like the shopping mall Oslo City, where rough sleepers are banned and, on the other hand, the underground stations where people frequently sleep and are let alone, although they are guarded by a security company night and day. What is not pointed to by any of the interview persons, is that the security guards do not act on behalf of themselves. The security companies are hired to guard the shops and other public, but privatised, places like the waiting hall at Oslo S. On the other hand, what they emphasise is that security guards do their jobs in different ways and are showing differing attitudes towards rough sleepers:

“In the parking houses you can sleep one night if you are lucky. You are in risk of being beaten, even if you don’t resist when you are asked to leave”. (IP5)

The interview persons who are experienced street-people emphasise the need of making alliances to survive. Is it possible to develop a positive or at least a useful relation to the guardians or owner of the places you go? According to IP4 it is not only possible. It is necessary:

“People chase you away. But after a while you get a relationship to those who chase you and they get a relation to you. This gives a kind of safety. [...] When people chase you, at least they know you exist. This is also a kind of safety”.

IP4 also tells that, when she was rough sleeping, she used the toilets in gas stations. She mentions one particular gas station in the inner city area where she for a period went to take care of personal hygiene and get ready. IP4 also allied with the security guards to keep her things in the luggage boxes unlocked. She also “understands” that the guards draw a limit when she had filled three boxes and asked her to remove her things. She even

expresses gratitude towards the guards, because their action pushed her find a place to live (the flat where she lives at the moment).

IP4 pinpoints that she likes Oslo at night, and in periods of rough sleeping, she made alliances which helped her to survive. She mentions gas stations with 24 hours service, where she could stay inside to get warm. According to IP4 it is not at all safe for a woman to be alone. She used to sleep with an iron bar by her side and quotes that “Sometimes you have to act as if you are mad and without limits to scare people away”. Because of the need of safety, she often preferred to stay in busy places.

IP5 has obviously made several contacts throughout his years on the streets. As mentioned above, he has places where he uses the toilets. He tells about relations to shop owners or sales assistants, who sometimes give him free food or more than he pays for: “Contacts is important. I survive because people are kind to me”. Sometimes other customers also pay for his food. A sales assistant in a sandwich shop confirms that customers sometimes buy food for beggars and homeless persons.

On our second meeting with IP1 he has a bad wound as a result of being beaten by a sales assistant in a fast food shop and a security guard. According to IP1 he was saved by the police, who happened to pass by. IP1 complains about that he has been chased around a lot the last week. He is always on the move. It is impossible to lay down in a park or green spot at day time, he states: “If I lay down here [sitting in park], I will be chased away immediately. [...] It is not easy to sleep in a park, not even at night time”.



IP1: "If I lie down, I will be chased away"

IP1 seems to be more chased around than the other interview persons. One explanation might be that he has recently returned to Oslo after some years of absence and therefore he is not quite familiar with the limits and “unwritten” rules that others of the interview persons seem to take for given, and which is expressed in terms of “behave properly”. Part of “the code of conduct” is to avoid lying down in parks and not to stay for a long time at one spot. Exceptions are “regular” spots for begging and selling the street paper. That is however considered as business or a job. The SA day centre and the similar places are therefore also important places to stay and to be social. This is just as important as the

provision of food, shower, laundry and assistant in contacting other services and this is why people with their own dwellings also spend time at these cafés.

Conflicts and alliances are not limited to the relations with the police, guards or merchants. There are conflicting interests towards other groups who use public places in the same way as the rough sleepers, like foreign beggars. They may be looked upon as competitors, as expressed by IP5:

“Most people in Oslo are kind. But after the gipsies¹⁰ arrived it has become more difficult to bum money. It is because they are so aggressive when begging! [...] Oslo is a city of kind people. It is a pity that gipsies violate this.”

What IP5 points at is that foreign beggars don't seem to know the codes of how to “behave”. He fears they will ruin the market by aggressive ways of begging and by “pretending to have disabilities”. An increasing number of beggars in Oslo, regardless of how they behave, also means there are more persons competing about the income from begging, which obviously worries IP5. When some foreign beggars tried to “take” IP5s street (where he begs and sell “=Oslo”), he chased them away.

However, conflicts among rough sleepers seem to be of greater importance than conflicts towards foreign beggars and are mentioned by all our interview persons¹¹. None of them finds much solidarity among themselves. IP4 holds that she has friends in the circle of rough sleepers, but at the same time she emphasises that everybody has enough with their own stuff and problems: “We all live at the border and tries to survive”.

IP6, who live in the sheds with friends, expresses that he for the time being is in a pretty comfortable situation. The relations between the mates are grounded on “making one own laws” within the group: No one steel from each other and they alternate in guarding the sheds and their belongings.

Some of the interview persons expresses that there is always a risk of being robbed when you sleep, and you have to consider whether it is safer to sleep alone or together with other people. IP5 sums up that:

“It is not always safe to sleep together with other people, but it might be helpful. People are not always nice to each other, the environment is marked by every ones strive to take care of oneself.”

With a few exceptions, the interview persons do not talk about intimate relations or it is mentioned in passing words. IP1 has contact with his mother, who also gives him money

¹⁰ The term gipsy is used by IP5 on all foreigners that are begging. There is little knowledge about the origin of many of the foreign people begging in the streets of Oslo.

¹¹ Foreign beggars do not stay together with the groups of rough sleepers and drug users, but according to the staff at the SA day centre some have visited the centre.

from time to time. But she lives in another part of the country and they don't see each other often. IP4 did want to stay at a shelter, among others because she could not be with her boyfriend. But she does not believe that relatives and former friends know where she is. If there interview persons close relations to other people, they do not seem to part of the daily life. Relations to people they socialise with in the environment is accounted for as complex; on the one hand it may be safer to stay with other people, but on the other hand they trust very few if any of other people living in the streets.

Concluding remarks

As expressed by homeless people in this study in different ways: The surroundings will not tolerate homeless persons being around for too long. There also seems to be conflicting need of feeling safe, being surrounded by people gives a feeling of protection, versus the need to be invisible. But our informants also express in that they should not be too visible in public places. Making themselves as little visible as possible seems to be one of the premises for being "allowed" to stay in and use public places.

According to Neil Smith (1993: 69) "homelessness is a dramatic loss of power over the way in which one's identity is constructed since, for the homeless person, the home no longer shields the public gaze." IP4 states that things are important when you live outside; you live among strangers and need things to give you identity.

It seems difficult and almost impossible to create a private space when spending most, or all, of the time in public places. Constant negotiations with the surroundings and to avoid conflicts may also be seen as an effort to get some privacy. Some persons, like IP3, find some privacy in the hostels. Others find it not much different from living in the streets. IP2 and IP6 (currently living the sheds) talk about times when they have had a place with roof, walls and a door to shut as good periods. They were sheltered both from the public and rules imposed by the services they have stayed in as alternatives to the street. Feeling of the loss of privacy seems to be present also by the most experienced rough sleepers like IP5, who has not slept in a bed for more than a year:

"It is not what you rest on that matters, I don't miss a bed. I miss to be able to lock the door, a place where I was left in peace."

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