Beyond Borders, Beneath The Surface: Homeless Migrants In Denmark – Hidden Realities And Systemic Interactions In A Welfare System

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Eleonora Macerata, University of Copenhagen
Contact: Elemace@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Denmark, a strong welfare state with high living standards for its citizens, presents a dissonance in the management of homeless migrants, particularly apparent when considering homeless EU citizens, who possess specific rights, including the right to free movement, and represent the majority of homeless migrants in the country.
As governmental policies can either facilitate or hinder the integration and well-being of homeless migrants, they play a pivotal role in determining the trajectory of their lives. Simultaneously, private solidarity provided by NGOs, community groups, and other private actors becomes indispensable.

RQ: How does the Danish government manage homelessness among EU migrants and how does it comply with international obligations?

2. Methodology

- **Legal analysis** of various national legislative sources, integrated by the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)* and the specific regulation pertaining to the time frame for the residence of European citizens in another member state, as outlined in *Directive 2004/38/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council.*
- **Ethnographic research** through *semi-structured interviews* and *participant observation* to consider the perspective of service providers, as they are the ones directly working with the homeless population affected by the consequences of these laws and political discourses in their day-to-day life.

An integrated approach represents an important chance for a conversation between disciplines, and a better understanding of how a specific legal framework and its institutions impact the behavior and experiences of individuals and communities.

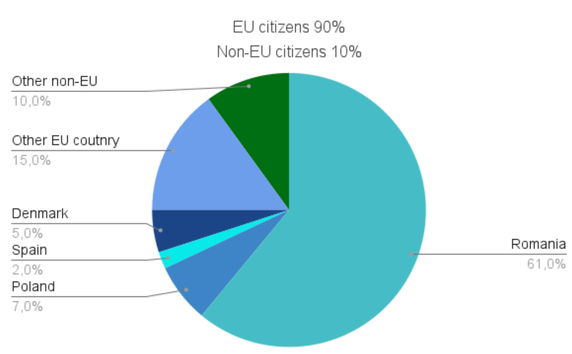
3. Theoretical framework

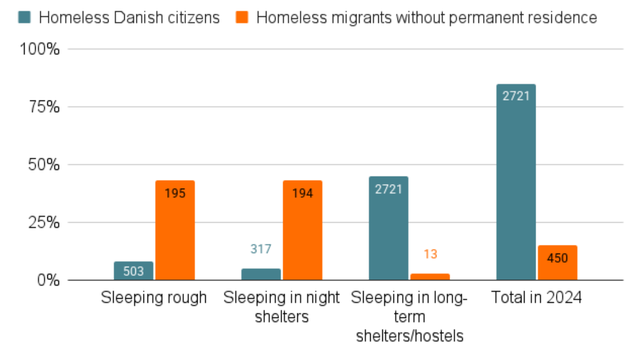
Methodological de-nationalism[1] critically examines the nation-state as a constructed, not natural, form of territorial organization. The exclusion of homeless EU citizens from welfare services reveals how, even within the EU, citizenship does not guarantee equal rights. Nation-states can thus use citizenship selectively to evade responsibilities of protecting human rights.
As *H. Arendt* observed, *"[The Rights of Man] proved to be unenforceable — even in countries whose constitutions were based upon them — whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state".*[2] She adds, *"The prolongation of [non-citizens'] lives is due to charity and not to right, for no law exists which could force the nations to feed them".*[3]
B. Anderson similarly notes that, *"In Europe, migration is seen to pose a 'tragedy of the commons' to welfare states and a threat to national culture".*[4] Migration, thus, appears not to be an inherent problem, but socially constructed as such through an active and state-endorsed process.

Home and homelessness
J. Moore emphasizes that conditions of homelessness often involve a search for home and attempts at home-making. Home transcends being a mere physical location.[5]
This perspective highlights the relative nature of homelessness, acknowledging that individuals can experience strong place attachment and bonds while being highly mobile. The tension between movement and rest, rootlessness and rootedness, and nomadism and sedentariness is central to both the experiences of home and homelessness.

4. Analysis and findings

Low visibility of homeless migrants: challenges in obtaining an accurate overview of the total homeless migrant population within the city.





CPR registration is not mandatory for EU citizens residing in Denmark for up to three months (or six if seeking work), but in practice, a CPR number is essential for accessing public services and assistance.[6] Public night shelters owned and operated by municipalities may deny accommodation without a yellow card (CPR number).[7]
As one social worker explains, *"In [public] shelters, social workers seem so afraid of doing something wrong that it gets easier to just say no",*[8] as they feel responsible for verifying legal status.
A registered address is also a requirement, yet most people seeking assistance lack one. While some countries allow registration at shelters or unofficial addresses, this is not practiced in Denmark, turning bureaucracy into *"a form of exclusion [...], the rhetoric of the Danish exclusionary paradigm".*[9]
Most migrants come to Denmark to work. Social workers emphasize that only a small fraction struggle with mental health or addiction early on; most face homelessness due to a lack of social support and limited access to assistance. As one states: *"Sleeping rough is not part of the plan, but it becomes the only option in the end, and very quickly".*[10]

Housing First has been widely adopted across Nordic countries as part of their welfare-oriented approach. Denmark's national homelessness strategy (2009–2012), implemented in eight municipalities, was built around four goals—the first being: *"No citizens should live a life on the streets".*[11]
However, many challenges arise to implement it, especially in Copenhagen. The city faces critical shortage of social housing, worsened by rapid urban development and restrictive accessibility.[12] Furthermore, the uniformity of housing fails to address the diverse needs of long-term homeless. Finally, CPR requirements further marginalizes migrants, raising concerns about the emergence of a separate class of homeless individuals. As one social worker warns: *"If we want to fight homelessness, we need to consider migrants or they will risk becoming a second category of homeless".*[13]
While Copenhagen has adopted FEANTSA's Homeless Bill of Rights, it remains a symbolic gesture.

Overcoming obstacles through private solidarity:
To address this void, certain private shelters step in to offer support. Yet, year-round shelter options remain scarce. NGOs like Projekt Udenfor aim, as one social worker puts it, *"to catch people that fell through the Danish social security network".*[14]
Another explains their broader role: *"Filling a gap for all the people who are falling out of the system, or who are out of the system, or trying to get back into the system… We help them navigate the system, find jobs, and help people with mental or physical problems".*[15] *"When it comes to migrants, it is considered an NGO problem, and there is a lack of support and understanding".*[16]

5. Conclusion

The research calls for a paradigm shift, viewing migration as an opportunity, prioritizing long-term integration and human rights protection. Overlooking homelessness among migrants and exacerbating their living conditions does not seem to incentivize departure; rather, it places undue pressure on both the Danish system and private actors.

1. B. Anderson, "New directions in migration studies: towards methodological de-nationalism". Comparative Migration Studies 7:36, (2019)
2. H. Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, The World Publishing Company, (1951), p.381
3. id., p.387
4. B. Anderson, "New directions in migration studies", p.1
5. J. Moore, "Polarity Or Integration? Towards A Fuller Understanding Of Home And Homelessness", Journal of Architectural and Planning Research 24:2, (2007)
6. K. Hyltén-Cavallius, "The use of personal identity numbers in Sweden and Denmark: a barrier to Union Citizens' enjoyment of free movement rights?". Being a Citizen in Europe : Insights and Lessons from the Open Conference, Zagreb. 86-98, (2015)
7. DanChurchSocial, "Unregistered homeless migrants in Copenhagen" (2017)
8. Interview n.2, Projekt Udenfor
9. Interview n.4, Kpmpasset
10. Interview n.6 Hugs&Food
11. Indenrigs og socialministeriet, The Government's Homelessness Strategy – A Strategy To Reduce Homelessness In Denmark, (2009)
12. Interview n.3, EAHR
13. Interview n.2
14. id.
15. Interview n.6
16. Interview n.4