

# HOMELESSNESS IN NORWAY: THE SUCCESS OF LONG-TERM HOUSING-LED STRATEGIES

In Norway, homelessness has been halved since 2012. One major explanation for this reduction is a sustained, coordinated, and integrated strategy, involving the development of housing and support services and the building-up of expertise. Efforts have focused on disadvantaged groups in the housing market in general, and specifically on families with children and those who suffer from substance abuse and mental health problems. This analysis by Husbanken demonstrates the importance of long-term housing-led approaches implemented at a national level.



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## REDUCTION OF HOMELESSNESS THROUGH NATIONAL COOPERATION

The national survey of homelessness in Norway<sup>1</sup> revealed that there were 3,325 homeless people in 2020. Given that Norway's population is about 5,400,000 inhabitants, this is equivalent to 0.62 per 1,000 inhabitants.

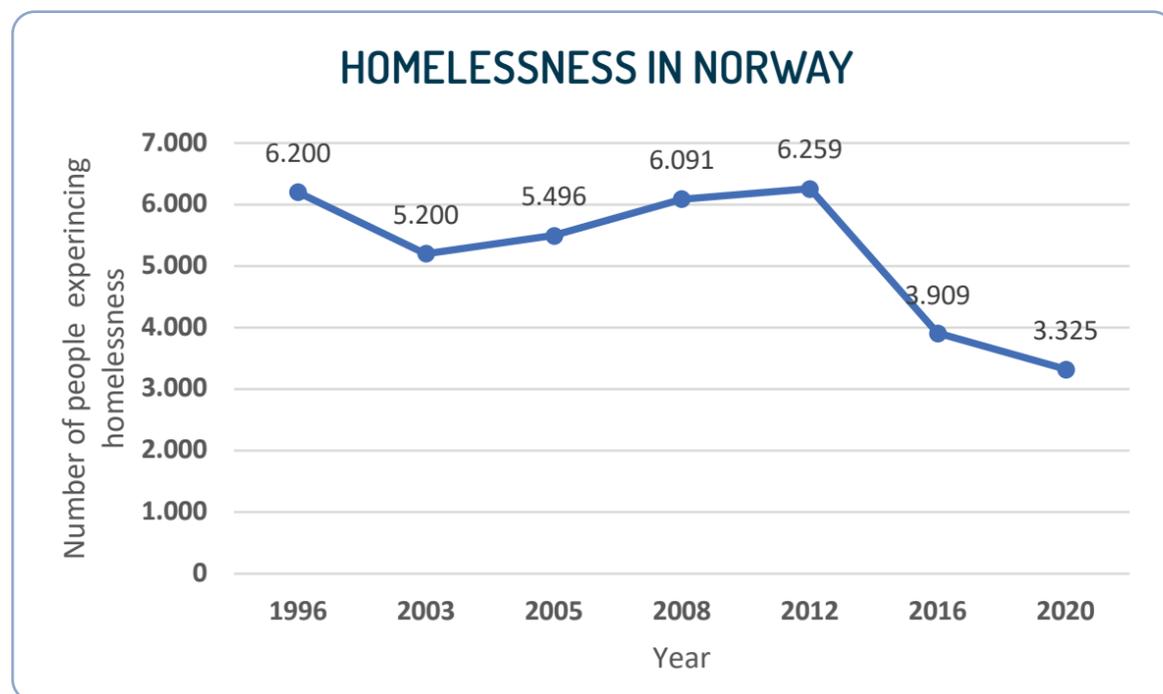


Figure: Nationwide survey; 48th week of the year (NIBR)

1 Dyb, E.; Zeiner, H. H. (2021). *Bostedsløse i Norge 2020 - en kartlegging*. ["Homelessness in Norway 2020 – a survey."] ISBN: 978-82-8309-340-7.

The reduction in the number of homeless people is a result of national cooperation and a long-term integrated strategy for housing and support services.<sup>2</sup> Responsibility for the Norwegian housing policy is split between the state, municipalities, and the private sector. The Norwegian state sets goals and provides a framework through laws, regulations, and financial tools such as loans and grants distributed through the Housing Bank. The public health and welfare services are responsible for homeless people. Municipalities should help disadvantaged groups in the housing market to access and maintain their own homes and are responsible for finding temporary accommodation for homeless people. This is also done in cooperation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In addition, municipalities are responsible for housing planning, renovating homes, and providing necessary infrastructures for housing development while the private sector (companies, organisations, and individuals) is responsible for building the houses.

2 *Boligsosialt arbeid*: Housing and support services including both providing housing for the disadvantaged in the housing market and strengthening the individual's opportunity to manage his/her own living situation. The work can be divided into operational and strategic tasks. The operational tasks involve providing advice and guidance, providing suitable housing, granting financial support, implementing housing and local community measures, as well as providing follow-up and services in the home. The strategic tasks involve establishing long-term goals, developing measures and tools to achieve these goals, and allocating financial and professional resources for the work, as well as deciding where and by whom the various operational tasks will be solved.

Homeless people in Norway fall within the category of disadvantaged groups in the housing market (housing needs and housing exclusion), defined as people and families who are unable to find and/or maintain a satisfactory housing arrangement on their own. These people find themselves in one or more of the following situations:

- without their own home (homeless)
- at risk of losing their home
- living in an unsuitable housing or living environment

A homeless person is defined as a person who does not own or rent a home; lives in makeshift or temporary housing arrangements; stays temporarily with close relatives, friends, or acquaintances; lives in a correctional service or an institution and is due for release within two months without a home to go to; or does not have any accommodation for the coming night.

The Norwegian definition is based on FEANTSA's (the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless) European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) and is the same as the definition used in Sweden and Denmark.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOMELESSNESS

The national survey of homelessness is one of the tools used by the Norwegian state to monitor trends in homelessness. The survey, which is carried out on a national basis and shows the number of homeless people in Week 48, must be viewed as a minimum estimate. To this date, seven surveys have been carried out (since 1996). The national survey of homelessness is initiated and financed by the Housing Bank<sup>3</sup> on behalf of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. The Housing Bank also funds research projects to increase our knowledge about people experiencing homelessness.

Statistically, the typical profile of a homeless person in Norway is a single man in his mid-to-late 30s, born in Norway. He has been homeless for a long time, has a substance abuse problem, and receives social or disability benefits. He lives in a town or city, where he stays in temporary accommodation or with friends and acquaintances<sup>4</sup>. However, the most recent surveys show that this profile is changing slightly.

There are few families with children that are homeless (112 adults and 142 children in 2020). By comparison, 679 homeless children were reported in 2012. From 2016 to 2020, the proportion of homeless people who were born outside Norway rose by 10% to 33%. There were 536 young homeless people under the age of 25 (16% of the total), which is a relatively low proportion compared with other European

<sup>3</sup> For more information visit [The Norwegian State Housing Bank – Husbanken](#)

<sup>4</sup> Dyb, E.; Zeiner, H. H. (2021). *Bostedsløse i Norge 2020 - en kartlegging*. ["Homelessness in Norway 2020 – a survey."] ISBN: 978-82-8309-340-7.



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countries. The proportion of homeless people under the age of 35 is falling, whereas there is a slight increase in homelessness amongst people over the age of 55. Moreover, 956 of the homeless people are women (29% of the total).

There are homeless people in all municipalities, but most live in the larger towns and cities. Only 19 of Norway’s 356 municipalities have 20 or more homeless people accounting for 67% of all homeless people in Norway. Almost half (48%) have a long history of homelessness, while for one quarter homelessness was a new acute problem in 2020.

Most homeless people live in temporary accommodation (31%) or stay with friends, acquaintances, or relatives (30%); 18% are people who don’t have a home to go to after leaving a treatment centre or a correctional facility; four percent were staying in a crisis shelter; and 2% have no place to sleep.

## LONG-TERM STRATEGIC WORK AND NATIONAL STRATEGIES

The goal of the Norwegian housing policy is to ensure adequate and secure housing for all, which includes a subsidiary goal of no-one being homeless. Since the first survey in 1996, Norway has worked strategically to reduce homelessness. To this date, there have been five strategic projects in Norway working with homeless people.

In the framework of the project “Local action plans for housing and support services” (1999-2001), the Housing Bank’s role was to provide all municipalities with the expertise and financial resources to draw up action plans for housing and support services. The project “Homeless people” (2001-2004) was a collaboration between the seven largest urban municipalities, NGOs, two ministries and a directorate, as well as the Housing Bank. The aim was to develop methods, practices and models that could be used in all municipalities to prevent and combat

homelessness. The housing and support service strategy “Towards your own home” (2005-2007) was the first national homelessness strategy that set specific targets.

The national strategy “Housing for Welfare 2014-2020”<sup>5</sup> was a collaboration between five ministries, which aimed to ensure a coordinated and targeted government approach to disadvantaged groups in the housing market. It sought to strengthen the ability of municipalities to help disadvantaged groups in the housing market, both at a technical and a financial level. The strategy included national and local measures such as capacity building activities, action plans, targets, and reporting. The strategy did not include any additional funding, but existing grants, loans and human resources were reoriented towards the goals and priorities that it set out. Goals relating to homelessness were also incorporated into the Norwegian Escalation Plan for the Substance Abuse Field (2016 to 2020), which earmarked NOK 500 million for new homes<sup>6</sup>. One of its key goals was to coordinate the work of the various specialist services. The Housing Bank has funding available for financing more homes.

The goal of the current national strategy “Everyone needs a safe home” (2021–2024)<sup>7</sup> is to help more disadvantaged people obtain a secure and adequate home. One of the subsidiary goals is to eliminate homelessness, and various actions have been taken to help achieve these goals. Within the long-term strategic work that has been done,

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5 See English version: [housing\\_for\\_welfare\\_national\\_strategy\\_for\\_housing\\_and\\_support\\_services\\_2014\\_2020.pdf](#) (regjeringen.no)

6 Approximately 50 million euros

7 Only in Norwegian: [oppdatert-versjon-alle-trenger-en-nytt-hjem.pdf](#) (regjeringen.no)

there has been a growing emphasis on cooperation across different areas of welfare provision and management levels from ministries to municipalities, and the approach has always been housing-led.

Research and evaluations show a link between the long-term approach implemented through the national strategies and a reduction in the number of homeless people<sup>8</sup>. The following is a list of factors considered important in Norway’s efforts to reduce homelessness:

- Both national and municipal authorities have shown a willingness to prioritise homeless people and other disadvantaged groups in the housing market.
- In Norway, responsibility for homeless people is shared between many sectors, including social services (including housing), child welfare services, correctional services, and health care services. When responsibility is shared between many sectors, their ability to cooperate is vital, which is something that has been stressed by the national strategies. Homeless people are often suffering from multiple complex problems, which means they need help from several services. If there is good coordination between those services, efforts to combat homelessness are more likely to succeed.
- The strategic projects have had other target groups as well as homeless people. That helps to prevent homelessness and thus combat homelessness over the longer term. It also allows bigger and more robust projects, which is important in a country with relatively few homeless people.

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8 Dyb, E. (2019). *Færre bostedsløse – hva er forklaringen?* [“Fewer homeless people – what is the explanation?”] ISBN: 978-82-8309-280-6.



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- A high proportion of homeless people are dealing with multiple problems and are considered long-term homeless. This group of homeless people is generally in contact with various support services, which makes it easier to target measures for them than for other groups of homeless people.
- The Housing Bank has financial tools consisting of loans and grants to help provide *suitable* homes for this target group<sup>9</sup>.
- The national strategies set clear goals and targets for homelessness, which the evaluations have considered important to establish and implement local measures.
- Since 2000, Norway has worked to provide more housing to reduce homelessness. This approach has also been incorporated into the strategies of other sectors in Norway, including the Escalation Plan for the Substance Abuse Field, which allocated NOK 500 million towards the building of new homes.
- The Housing Bank is responsible for ensuring that there are regular surveys of homelessness, and that work is done to obtain better data. Municipalities and politicians take notice of the results and homelessness moves up the agenda<sup>10</sup>.
- Young people and families with children have been prioritised over an extended period, which has put the spotlight on these groups and led to measures aimed at them.

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9 OECD (2020), “Better data and policies to fight homelessness in the OECD”, Policy Brief on Affordable Housing, OECD, Paris, <http://oe.cd/homelessness-2020>

10 Dyb. E. (2020) “Reinventing Homelessness through Enumeration in Norwegian Housing Policies: A Case Study of Governmentality.” *Housing, Theory and Society* Vol 38, No 5 ([tandfonline.com](http://tandfonline.com))

- The strategies have stressed the importance of developing and building expertise through the Housing Bank and of sharing knowledge about homelessness with municipalities and other agencies responsible for helping homeless people. An important aspect of this work is gathering and disseminating the experiences of municipalities<sup>11</sup>.
- The national strategies do not set out any particular methodology that municipalities should follow in their work on housing homeless people. Municipalities generally follow the principles of “Housing First”, but with significant local adaptations. These adaptations are necessary considering the high number of municipalities in Norway (356), many of which are small and have relatively few homeless people.

Compared with other countries, there are few homeless people in Norway. On an international level, only Finland has achieved a similar reduction to Norway. Finland and Norway are pioneer countries in adopting and developing a housing-led approach<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> The evaluation of “Housing for Welfare” found increasing expertise at agencies.

<sup>12</sup> Dyb, Evelyn (2019). *Færre bostedsløse – hva er forklaringen?* [“Fewer homeless people – what is the explanation?”] ISBN: 978-82-8309-280-6. 5

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