

---

# Measurement of Homelessness in the Nordic Countries

---

Lars Benjaminsen, Hanna Dhalmann, Evelyn Dyb,  
Marcus Knutagård and Jarmo Lindén

The Danish Center for Social Science Research (VIVE), Denmark

The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (ARA), Finland

Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research NIBR, Oslo Metropolitan  
University, Norway

School of Social Work, Lund University, Sweden

The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (ARA), Finland

➤ **Abstract** *The four Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden all have long time series data on homelessness, which is more or less comparable between the countries. The data is gathered through particular homelessness censuses ('counts') using methods developed for the purpose. The four countries initiated the counts at different times, Finland as the first in 1987 and the latest, Denmark, in 2007. Despite some national differences, the definitions and methods are widely similar. In all four countries, the definition of homelessness encompasses not only rough sleepers and shelter users but also people staying temporarily with family and friends. This is also reflected in the methodology of the counts as they draw not only upon homeless services but include wider parts of the welfare system into the data collection. However, one notable difference is that Denmark, Norway and Sweden collect substantially more information about homeless individuals than Finland, thus allowing for identifying particular sub-groups within the homeless population. In Finland and Sweden the data collection is carried out by state agencies, while in Denmark and Norway the data collection is conducted by research institutes. In Norway the first count was initiated by researchers, however the definition of homelessness and the methodology was almost a duplicate of the state-initiated count conducted in Sweden. Regardless of origin, and which agencies carry out the registration, these registrations and the numbers they produce are vital tools for the respective governments' steering of the homeless policy.*

› **Keywords\_** *Homelessness count, measurement, data collection, statistics, Nordic countries.*

## Introduction

---

The Nordic countries generally have low levels of poverty and social inequality in international comparison. In the research literature on types of welfare systems they all cluster together in what has widely been referred to as the social democratic type of welfare system (Esping-Andersen, 1993). Research has shown that this type of welfare system generally produces a relatively low level of homelessness in international comparison with homelessness mainly affecting people with complex needs (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015). Yet, even in these egalitarian countries with some of the most extensive welfare systems in the world, national homelessness statistics for several years have shown the persistence of a homelessness problem. Finland was the first amongst the Nordic countries to collect nationwide data on homelessness as the first national homelessness statistics was published in Finland already in 1987. Sweden followed with its first nationwide figures in 1993, although Sweden applied a methodology of data collection that was principally different from that in Finland. When Norway conducted its first homelessness count in 1996 the definition, as well as the methodology, was widely adopted from the first count in Sweden and when Denmark conducted its first homelessness count in 2007 both the definition and methodology was widely mirrored on the Swedish and Norwegian counts. Although Denmark was the last of the four countries to conduct a homelessness count, Denmark had already since 1999 established an extensive data collection system encompassing all Danish homeless shelters with the publication of an annual 'shelter statistics'.

In this article we shall explore in detail the methods of measuring homelessness in the four Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> In the first section, we outline the definitions and categories of homelessness measured in each country. In the second section, we describe the methodological approaches in detail and with a particular focus on the principal differences between the widely similar methodologies used in Denmark, Norway and Sweden compared to a different methodology used in Finland. The third section examines the general strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies and the fundamental challenges involved in measuring homelessness are discussed based on the experiences from the counts. The fourth section

---

<sup>1</sup> The fifth and smallest of the Nordic countries – Iceland – is not covered in the article, although a count of homelessness recently took place in Reykjavik documenting a similar profile of homelessness in the Icelandic capital as in the four larger Nordic countries.

explores the basic trends in patterns in homelessness in the countries with a particular focus on how differences in definitions and methodologies relate to the observed trends. The final section gives concluding remarks.

## Definitions of Homelessness

---

A fundamental similarity across the Nordic countries is that the definitions of homelessness (Box 1) are all housing based, as they refer to the housing situation of the individual and do not include other characteristics of the individual person. In the research report presenting the first Norwegian homelessness count, Ulfrstad (1997) refers to a discussion in the Swedish research literature relating homelessness to the concepts of housing (Sahlin, 1992). According to Sahlin, in a historical perspective, the term homelessness has widely referred to certain life styles involving deviant behaviour, addiction and criminality, while housing, on the other hand, refers to statistical and judicial aspects of the dwelling (ibid.). Ulfrstad, with reference to Sahlin, maintains that the housing related definition emphasises the lack of a secure dwelling, in opposition to the traditional moral concept of homelessness, and thus is the most suitable concept for statistical purposes. In this way the arguments for adopting a housing-oriented definition widely resembled the arguments involved when the ETHOS-definition of homelessness and housing exclusion was developed several years later by the European Observatory on Homelessness within FEANTSA.

Although Sweden and Norway followed a different counting methodology than Finland, it was also characteristic that all three countries from the beginning included not only rough sleepers and shelter users into their homelessness definitions but also people in hidden homelessness staying temporarily with friends and relatives due to the lack of their own place to live. When Denmark started conducting national homelessness counts several years later, it was based on a similar definition incorporating hidden homelessness as well.

The inclusion of hidden homelessness into the definitions should generally be seen in relation to the universal welfare services and the high level of de-commodification in the Nordic welfare systems that generally reduce the dependence on the family for providing care and support for people in need. This extends also into the understanding of homelessness as people who lack their own place to live should not be in need to depend on their family – which especially can be difficult for marginalised people who often have less resources in their family background than the average population.

Besides the category of people staying temporarily with relatives or friends, the broad understanding of homelessness is also underlined by the inclusion of institutional discharge without a housing solution into the definitions in all four countries. Thus, the definitions also include people awaiting discharge from hospitals and treatment facilities or release from prison without a housing solution, with only some minor variations amongst the countries in these categories such as differences in the criteria on duration and time until discharge for these situations to be regarded and counted as homelessness.

Table 1

Country	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
National homelessness definition	<p>Conceptual definition: People are homeless when they do not have their own dwelling or room (owned or rented) but use temporary facilities, stay temporarily and without a contract with family, friends or acquaintances. People are also homeless if they have no place to stay the following night.</p> <p>Operative definition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sleeping on the street, in a stairway, a shed etc.</li> <li>- Staying in an emergency night shelter</li> <li>- Staying in a homeless shelter/homeless hostel</li> <li>- Staying in a hotel, hostel or similar due to homelessness</li> <li>- Staying temporarily and without a contract with family, friends or acquaintances</li> <li>- Staying in transitional housing without a permanent contract</li> <li>- Discharge from prison or criminal ward within a month without a housing solution</li> <li>- Release from hospital or treatment facility within a month without a housing solution</li> <li>- Other (e.g. staying in camping wagons or garden allotment houses)</li> </ul>	<p>Single homeless persons without permanent place of residence. This group includes people:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- living outdoors, staircases, night shelters for homeless people</li> <li>- living in hostels or equivalent form of temporary residence due to lack of housing (usually paid by social services to provide person emergency housing)</li> <li>- living in care homes or other housing units, rehabilitation units and hospitals due to lack of housing. This category does not include those who are permanently placed to these institutions (have a rent contract with the institution or are not otherwise searching for housing)</li> <li>- living temporarily with relatives or friends. This category does not include young people (under 25) living with their parents.</li> </ul> <p>Homeless families:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Families and couples who are living in temporary housing or split up due to the lack of housing</li> </ul>	<p>A person is homeless when s/he lacks a place to live, either rented or owned, and finds themselves in one of the following situations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Has no place to stay for the night</li> <li>- Is referred to emergency or temporary shelter accommodation</li> <li>- Is a ward of the correctional service and due to be released in two months at the latest</li> <li>- Is a resident of an institution and due to be discharged in two months at the latest</li> <li>- Lives with friends, acquaintances or family on a temporary basis</li> </ul> <p>Persons living in sublet accommodation or residing permanently with family and close relations are not covered by the definition.</p>	<p>The official national definition of homelessness in Sweden is divided into four homelessness situations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. acute homelessness;</li> <li>2. institutional or assisted living;</li> <li>3. long-term living arrangements organised by social services (e.g. the secondary housing market); and</li> <li>4. private short-term living arrangements</li> </ol>

Although the understandings and definitions of homelessness are very similar across all the four countries, there are also important differences. Whilst the basic methodology is the same in the homelessness counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden – and different from the methodology in Finland – the most notable difference in the definitions of homelessness across the four countries do not follow this basic difference in the methodology as the most distinctive difference in the definitions is that the Swedish definition includes a main category of people living in ordinary housing but with second-hand and temporary rental contracts. In Sweden, it is common that municipal social services rent a flat from a housing association and holds the contract and then sublets the flat to homeless people on a second-hand contract and often with some behavioural conditions attached to it, regarding the possibility to achieve a permanent rent contract, which usually requires meeting certain criteria such as adherence to substance abuse treatment or even abstinence. The hegemony of the staircase of transition in Sweden has been widely documented in the Swedish research literature (Sahlin, 2005; Löfstrand, 2005; Knutagård, 2009). It has also been emphasised how the growth of the secondary housing market in Sweden should be seen in the wider context of liberalisation and marketisation in Swedish housing policies that has generally introduced stronger barriers of access to housing for marginalised people in Sweden. In terms of the definition of homelessness it explains why people on temporary contracts in the secondary housing market is an important category in the Swedish homelessness definition.

Although secondary contracts are also used in Finland, this category is not included in the Finnish definition of homelessness as people with a rent contract with the municipality widely holds the same rights and autonomy as other tenants (the law granting quite strong rights and security for tenants in general). Moreover, any additional behavioural conditions do not apply to these contracts in Finland whereas this is usually the case in Sweden.

Although homelessness policies in both Finland and Norway historically also had considerable elements of the Treatment First model (or setting behavioural requirements for obtaining housing without necessarily providing sufficient treatment and support) the turn towards a Housing First and housing-led model has been stronger in these countries compared to Sweden, and Housing First has been the mainstream principle of Finnish homelessness policies for more than a decade. However, the Finnish model of Housing First differs from the US Pathway model. In Finland, the residents pay the rent themselves and needed services are offered for them using the existing services in society (Y-Foundation, 2017). In Norway, Housing First appeared rather late representing one of several methods, and is quite close to the US Pathway Housing First model. However, an orientation towards a housing-led model occurred in Norwegian policy programmes already from the early 2000s. In Denmark, Housing First was introduced as the main principle in homelessness

policies in 2009 and although elements of the Treatment First approach were common before that time, the use of secondary contracts never played a role in Danish homelessness policies due to a strong tradition of providing own primary rental contracts when vulnerable people were housed in the public housing sector. Thus in Denmark, Finland and Norway the national homelessness definition and the operational categories used in the counts do not include people on secondary contracts simply because this is not a common situation in these countries or as in Finland because the tenant rights and obligations when using secondary contracts are generally similar to primary contracts.

## **The Methodologies of Data Collection on Homelessness in the Four Countries**

---

In this section, the methodologies of measuring homelessness in the Nordic countries are examined in detail. Although Finland was the first amongst the four countries to enumerate homelessness, we shall first explore the methodology used in the homelessness counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, as these countries widely follow the same methodology that originated from the first Swedish homelessness count, and was since then adopted in both Norway and Denmark.

### ***The homelessness counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.***

In Denmark, Norway and Sweden data on homelessness are collected by cross sectional 'counts' or 'censuses' measuring homelessness in a time window of one week. In the national language the wording used about these censuses/counts is 'mappings' (kortlægning/kartlegging/kartlægning). For conceptual reasons and corresponding to the common terminology in the international research literature we shall use the term 'counts' in this article. The counts include persons in the homelessness situations included in the respective definitions of each country and who are in contact with or known by the local services in the time window of one week. The counts are generally carried out in two steps. Step one involves mapping and composing the sample of respondents – the local services and agencies that will participate in the count. At step two, these services and agencies fill out an individual questionnaire for each homeless person they are in contact with or know of during the time window. As the counts are comprehensive data collections involving a large number of local services, they are not conducted every year. In Sweden, the counts are only conducted every sixth year, in Norway every four years, whereas Denmark has the shortest interval conducting the count every second year. The time scale is decided by the government and is a political decision reflecting what the governments in each country finds is adequate for steering purposes.

A very important aspect of the methodology is that the data collection for the counts is not restricted to the homelessness sector, i.e. street outreach teams and homeless shelters. In fact, these are a minor part of the respondent group. The majority of respondents incorporate a wide range of other agencies and services in the welfare system. In this regard, the homelessness counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden can be characterized as 'extended service-based counts' whereby 'extended' refers to the inclusion of a wide range of services outside the homeless sector. Thus, the data collection also includes municipal social services, employment agencies, addiction treatment centres, and psychiatric treatment facilities, selected parts of the general health systems in each country, prisons, and a wide range of NGO-services. The inclusion of this wider range of services into the counts is crucial in order to obtain information on people experiencing hidden homelessness, and especially information about people staying temporarily with friends or relatives due to homelessness, as information on this group is often reported from for instance municipal social agencies, employment agencies, or treatment facilities etc. that have people in this situation amongst their clients. Besides the overall commonality in the type of services included in the counts, there are also some variations between the three countries in what services are included, depending primarily on the more specific characteristics of service provision in each country. For instance in Norway and Sweden, all women's crisis centres are generally included in the count, whereas in Denmark centres for women experiencing domestic violence are generally not included in the counts, as these centres are operated under a specific paragraph in the social service law, with separate statistics attached to these services. In this way the specific setup of services and the legislative framework within each country is likely to determine more specific decisions on what type of services to include in the counts – and what type of situations to define as homelessness.

The agencies and services participating in the count collect individual data for each person they are in contact with or they know is in a homelessness situation during the count week. The information is collected on the basis of an individual questionnaire that besides information about the specific type of homelessness situation also comprises demographic background variables (gender, age, nationality) as well as income source, health, reasons for homelessness and information on other services that the person receives. Although the questionnaires used in each country are quite similar, there are also some variations for instance regarding details about household composition and educational status, the latter being recorded in the Norwegian questionnaire but not in the Danish and Swedish ones.

In all three countries it is optional for the agencies and services participating in the count to choose whether service users are involved in filling out the individual information or whether information is filled out by staff, which is most common for



the majority of services in all three countries, a procedure permitted in national data protection laws and/or by special permissions in the case of data collections of national interest in its field. For health services this type of data collection also requires special permissions from health authorities. The data collection is both internet and postal based, and the choice of response channel is also optional for the services. In Sweden, the data is collected by a government agency – the National Board of Health and Welfare, whereas in Denmark and Norway the counts have been conducted by research institutes (The Danish Center for Social Science Research VIVE and The Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research NIBR) on behalf of central government agencies.

When collecting individual data across many different local agencies and services a crucial element is to be able to conduct a rigorous control for ‘double counts’ – the risk of collecting data on the same person more than once. This control is conducted through collecting information that can provide identification of each individual. In Denmark and Sweden, data laws permit the collection of full personal numbers that are unique identifiers, whereas in Norway there is no permission to collect the full personal number and instead the person’s year of birth, the birthday (not month) and initials is registered. Yet, also in Denmark and Sweden full personal numbers are not obtained for all persons registered in the count, and partial information such as initials is also used in these cases to control for duplicates. Through combining the available information about the persons recorded, duplicates are identified and removed. This method is not “watertight”, and there is both a risk of removing ‘false positives’ or keeping in ‘false negatives’ in the data. Yet, a rigorous control combining both electronic and manual control is conducted to avoid counting the same person more than once or identified ‘false duplicates’ in cases when persons for instance has similar initials and/or similar birth dates.

Besides the differences in whether full personal identification information is allowed to be collected, another difference in the methodologies between these otherwise very identical counts, regards the extent to which subsampling and weighing procedures are involved – both regarding the selection of respondents and to compensate for fallouts in responses from certain local services. Such weighting and estimation procedures have been used in the Norwegian counts where they have been introduced at two stages. The first stage compensate for a selection of municipalities. In 1996 (the first count), Norway had around 450 municipalities, mainly with less than 40000 and the majority below 10000 inhabitants. To make the survey manageable, whilst all municipalities above 40000 inhabitants were included, a selection of municipalities with less than 40000 inhabitants was grouped by population and, within each group, a sample was randomly selected. The number of registered homeless in these municipalities was weighted, simply to compensate for the selection. Small adjustments to the municipal selections,

primarily due to mergers and population growth, were made in the proceeding surveys. However, major changes were introduced in 2012, when a group of municipalities participating in a national led social housing work programme was included (many was already among the selection of municipalities, but not all). As changes of the number of people recorded in homelessness was generally considered an important measure of progress and a result from the programme, including this group of municipalities not part of the original selection criterion, contributed to a skewness of the original selection. In the count in 2016 and 2020, which is not yet reported or published, all municipalities were included, and weighting to compensate for selection of municipalities was no longer required.

Moreover, estimations at a second stage was introduced in the Norwegian count in 2003 to compensate for fallout of respondents. These estimations are based on the assumption that the fallouts (non-participating services) know of/are in contact with half the number of homeless persons compared to those who respond. The estimates are applied on the most important municipal respondents, those who usually register most homeless persons, and not on the national sample. An average number of homeless persons in groups of respondents and groups of municipalities and city districts constitute a base for calculating a number of homeless amongst the units that did not respond. In the most recent counts this procedure has been simplified, and this weighting procedure has only been applied on a limited scale in the latest counts. All forms of weighting and calculations, although based on representative numbers for specific groups of municipalities (population size which largely coincide with the urban/rural dimension) implies a certain insecurity, which demands caution regarding the weighting criterion. A limited weighting procedure is likely to compensate for a minimum of the under-reporting due to fallouts among respondents, whereas not weighting for important fallouts (types of municipalities/agencies that normally report the major share of homeless persons) would result in a too low figure (evaluated in Dyb, 2019).

By contrast, such sampling and weighting procedures are not included in the Danish count. When Denmark initiated its first national count in 2007, a reform of administrative divisions in Denmark had just reduced the number of municipalities from about 270 to only 98 municipalities, and it was decided to include all municipalities into the Danish count. Likewise, in the Danish count weighting procedures are not used to compensate for fallouts in the responses from particular local services. The overall participation rate has generally been high in Denmark, especially amongst the most important services such as homeless shelters and municipal social centres, that in combination contribute with large numbers of individual cases. Given a relatively high participation rate, it has so far been considered that the potential benefits of introducing weighting procedures is outweighed by the distortion it introduces between estimates and the actually counted number

of people. However, in the Danish count in 2019 there was a certain decline in participation rates, albeit this drop was primarily restricted to a few smaller and a few medium-sized municipalities. Yet, even this relatively moderate decline could be detected in the actual numbers reported, and in the overall reporting of results it was concluded that a small decline in homelessness numbers from approximately 6 600 in 2017 to 6 400 people in 2019, could mainly be attributed to this decline in responses in a smaller number of municipalities and that if this drop had not occurred the figures in 2019 could be expected to have been similar to those in 2017 (Benjaminsen, 2019). A similar challenge of declining response rates has been seen in Sweden. In the latest count one fifth of the Swedish municipalities (290 in total) did not respond to the questionnaires. Yet, most of the municipalities that did not respond were relatively small with less than 15 000 inhabitants. These challenges underline that a level of general uncertainty is to be expected in a nationwide count of a complex phenomenon of homelessness that relies on the reporting from hundreds of local agencies and services.

### ***Homelessness statistics in Finland***

As previously mentioned, Finland was the first amongst the Nordic countries to provide national statistics on homelessness as data on homelessness has been collected in Finland every year since 1987 where ending homelessness was also mentioned for the first time in the programme of the government. The information has been obtained in the same way every year since then and is collected by the Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (ARA). Only minor changes in the statistics have occurred as more profiling information has been included over time (men/women, young people and people with immigrant background). Data on people in penal institutions to be released without a home was collected until 2014. The data provides cross-sectional (point in time) data on homelessness; the date of the count being on the 15th of November each year. Thus, compared to the other three countries an important difference is that the data collection on homelessness in Finland is a one day count which is conducted on a yearly basis compared to the 'week counts' not conducted every year in the three other countries.

The basic methodology in the Finnish data collection is also different compared to the extended service-based counts that are conducted in the three other countries and where the data is collected simultaneously from a wide range of agencies and services both public and private. Instead, the data on homelessness in Finland is gathered with an electronic survey that is sent to all Finnish municipalities at the same time every year by ARA. Municipalities gather the information on homeless persons in their municipalities from different sources e.g. housing officials and municipal rental housing companies (people applying for subsidised/council housing), social officials and service providers (information on customers).

Municipalities are also instructed to use register data to complete their estimate on the number of homeless persons and families. For example, homeless persons are prioritised in the social housing allocation procedures. Therefore, some people might falsely report themselves being homeless. Looking into persons' information from the Population Information System might therefore reveal that the person has a permanent place of residence. Earlier, the municipalities' social services granted the social assistance that is last-resort financial assistance, but this task was centralised to the Social Insurance Institution of Finland in 2017. Since then, the biggest municipalities have also received a list of social assistance applicants that have identified to be homeless, from the Social Insurance Institution. The municipalities go through and cross-check the data from different sources by using the social security numbers to remove any duplicates.

The information on homelessness is gathered for different population groups (men/women, young people under the age of 25, persons with immigrant background, single persons/families). Thus, a difference compared to the individual questionnaires used in the counts in the three other countries is that less profiling information is obtained in the Finnish data collection that rather record the most fundamental demographic data of the person rather than filling out a full individual questionnaire. The collected data is processed by ARA. Any noted anomalies (for example big changes in the numbers compared to previous years) are checked with the municipalities. The survey also includes questions about the sources that the municipality has used to obtain the data and an open field where municipalities can explain, for example, the reasons for the possible changes in the figures as well as the measures done to reduce homelessness.

## **Strengths and Weaknesses in Measurement**

---

As previously mentioned in Denmark, Norway and Sweden a general concern regards the participation rate. As it is all voluntary for agencies and services – public as well as private – to participate in the count, a high participation rate is crucial to fulfil the main objective of the counts, namely, to establish a complete national number of people in a homelessness situation. Although there is mostly a good commitment to participate in the counts amongst majority of the services, the non-response rate has been increasing in the most recent counts in all three countries and is generally a challenge when conducting the homelessness counts. In all three countries, there is generally a continuous increase in the number of surveys and obligations to report on services for local authorities. Thus, the attention and time of the respondents to prioritise the homeless counts meets heavy competition from other surveys and administrative reporting responsibilities. As accounted for above, fallouts can to some extent be compensated for by

applying some weighting and adjustment of the reported figures as is done in the Norwegian count in order to establish a more precise figure. However, at the same time all forms of adjustments potentially distort the number of people that were actually counted. The challenge of non-response from local services is generally met with prioritising reminders to and personal contact with important respondents in cities and larger municipalities. These respondents register the bulk of homeless persons, and reducing the fallout in these respondent groups substantially reduces the insecurity of the total number of people experiencing homeless.

In Finland, as previously mentioned, the data collection is organised differently as each municipality collects and processes local data – including administrative data, before a number (and other key information) is reported from each municipality to the central data collecting agency. A general weakness of the data collection is that even if the municipalities are given instructions, the practices and sources to gather data vary between municipalities and are not always well documented. Yet, the response rate of the Finnish survey to municipalities is generally good including almost all municipalities as the responding municipalities represent a total of around 99 per cent of the Finnish population.

Another issue, which may be considered as a weakness, is that the registration in the extended service-based counts in Denmark, Norway and Sweden is limited to homeless persons in contact with or known by the welfare, health and correctional services etc. that participate in the counts. Thus, the overall number of people recorded in a homelessness situation generally excludes those people who may not be in contact with or is otherwise known by any of these services. Yet, the wide range of services, and the fact that a majority of the respondents are not services specifically targeting homelessness, largely compensate for this weakness.

Another issue not directly related to the benefit of each count or to the method as such, is the lack of complete individual identification data in the case of the Norwegian count. With individual identification data from the homeless count can be coupled to other data bases, which in turn might have opened up for establishing control groups, tracking individual homeless histories and other more sophisticated analysis and access to extended knowledge about homelessness. In Denmark, where the full personal numbers are allowed to be recorded, and where more than four out of five registrations contain the full personal number, these numbers have been coupled to general register data, following the strict safety procedures involved in conducting this type of analysis, thus enabling more detailed analysis of risk factors and pathways in and out of homelessness (Benjaminsen and Enemark, 2017).

## Trends in Homelessness

---

The measurement of homelessness in the four countries enables the comparison of trends across the countries over a long period of years. In Finland, Sweden and Norway the results go back two to three decades and in Denmark the counts have provided numbers of homelessness for a decade. The counts generally show a diverging trend across the countries, as a decrease in homelessness has been observed in both Finland and Norway, whereas increases have been seen in both Denmark and Sweden in recent years.

In Finland homelessness has been more than halved since 1987 when the statistics started as more than 18 000 people were recorded in homelessness when the measurement was done for the first time more than three decades ago. Especially, long-term homelessness has diminished notably and today, the biggest share of homeless people lives with friends and families. This development can generally be attributed to a systematic application of the Housing First approach which has involved the replacement of shelters with permanent housing solutions that has inevitably led in reduction of those living in shelter and emergency accommodation. For example, in Helsinki, there is currently only a service centre with around 50 beds for emergency use. The Finnish policies have also included a targeted approach to increasing general housing supply aimed at low income and marginalised groups.

In Norway, there has been some fluctuation in figures but the most recent count documents a downward trend. The first count in 1996 registered 6200 persons. By the next census (2003) the number had dropped to 5200 persons. After 2003 there is a small but steady increase up till 2008, when the curve flattens. The actual number further increased up to 2012, however due to population growth the relative number in 2012 stayed equal to the count in 2008. Yet, the latest available figures show a considerable decrease in homelessness as about 3900 people were recorded in a homelessness situation in the latest count from 2016.

In Denmark, comparisons of figures usually take 2009 as a point of departure, due to a minor adjustment of the definition following the experiences of the first count. Whilst about 5000 people was recorded in a homelessness situation in the first count (of which about 500 were rough sleepers), this figure showed a succeeding increase during the following counts and culminated in 2017 where about 6600 people were recorded to be in a homelessness situation during the count week. This number decreased slightly in 2019, when 6400 people were recorded to be in a homelessness situation. However, as previously mentioned this small decrease could mainly be attributed to a small decline in the participation rates in a smaller number of municipalities and when taking this into account the Danish figures are assessed to be on a similar level in 2019 as in 2017.

The largest increase in homelessness has been documented in Sweden, which has both the highest absolute and relative homelessness figures amongst the Nordic countries. Sweden has had five national homelessness counts (1993, 1999, 2005, 2011 and 2017). Although the overall level of homelessness was similar in the latest count in 2017 compared to 2011, the number of people in acute homelessness increased and there was particularly an increase in the number of women in acute homelessness. A large share of these women have children and a large share were born in another country. One third of the women in acute homelessness reported domestic violence as one of the factors behind their homelessness situation. In the 2017 count there was also an increase in the number of people in long-term living arrangements without permanent contracts (e.g. the secondary housing market) that make up almost half of all people recorded in homelessness. In total, Sweden had 33 269 homeless persons in 2017. Of the total number 15 838 belonged to situation three, which includes living in the secondary housing market and other long-term but non-permanent living arrangements organised by social services. As previously mentioned, this secondary housing market has increased in size over the years and has become an institutionalised practice.<sup>2</sup> However, only few people (7.8 per cent) end up taking over the contract and as a consequences of this system, it is difficult to progress to a first-hand contract, and the sub-let contract increases the risk of the household to fall out and lose their contract if they do not comply with the rules. If the secondary housing market would be excluded from the definition of homelessness, the number of homeless individuals per thousand inhabitants would drop from 3.3 to 1.7 (Knutagård, 2018).

The Swedish count in 2017 also showed that around 25 per cent of the persons in long-term living arrangements did not have any other problems than the lack of housing. The results from Sweden indicate that homelessness increasingly falls into two categories. The socially homeless and the so-called structurally homeless. The former refers to homeless persons that have other social problems like mental health problems, addiction, debts *et cetera* in combination with the lack of housing. The structurally homeless refers to persons that only lack housing. In two municipalities (Gothenburg and Malmö), new guidelines have been adopted that guides the social workers not to assist structurally homeless persons or families. They are only entitled to emergency assistance, if they cannot find a solution on their own. For single homeless individuals, this emergency assistance is on a day-to-day basis, and for homeless families it is on a weekly basis (Sahlin, 2020). The full effects of these guidelines remain to be seen, but there is a high risk for structurally homeless individuals and families to end up in a homelessness situation that would

---

<sup>2</sup> According to the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (NBHBP) there were 26 100 apartments on the secondary housing market in 2019 (NBHBP, 2019).

be defined as socially homeless. Families are placed in emergency housing for a week and after a week they have to reapply for emergency assistance. This can lead to children having to move to a new place every week.

The results of the counts also show that besides people in temporary accommodation (shelters, homeless hostels etc.), people staying with friends and relatives are also a relatively large group. For instance in Denmark, in the latest count from 2019, there were 2290 people in homeless shelters/hostels and an additional 313 people in emergency night shelters, whereas there were 1 630 people staying with friends and relatives, due to homelessness. In 2019, 732 people were recorded as rough sleepers in the Danish count. In Finland the vast majority – 3067 people were staying temporarily with friends or relatives, whereas there were 1 167 either staying outside or in temporary shelter and hostels. Also in Norway the largest group (37 per cent) consists of those who stay with friends, acquaintances or relatives, whereas 29 per cent live in temporary lodging (Dyb and Lid, 2017).

However, when comparing the number of homeless people recorded across the countries it should be taken into account that the size of the general population varies across the four countries, with Sweden having by far the biggest population, as there are about 10 million inhabitants in Sweden, almost 6 million in Denmark and about 5½ million inhabitants in both Finland and Norway.

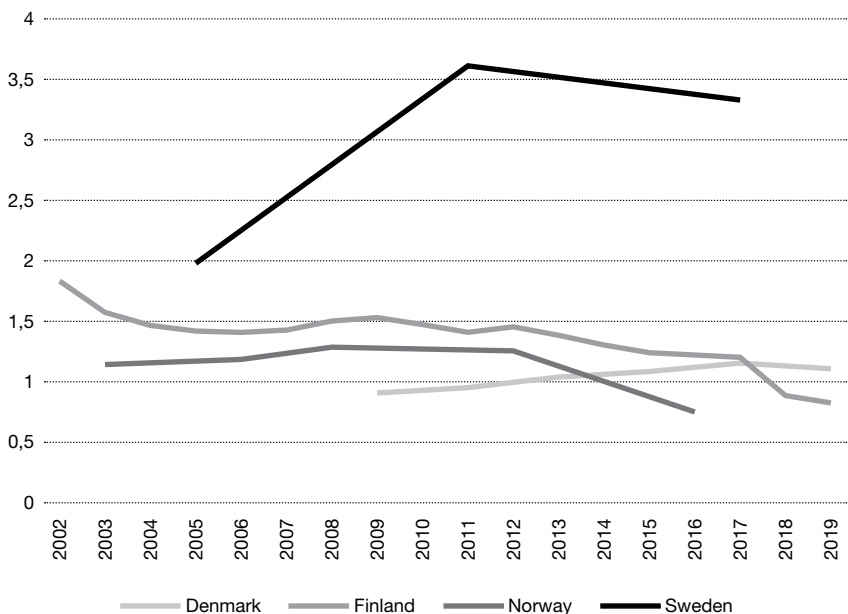
Figure 1 shows the number of people recorded in homelessness per 1000 inhabitants and thus enables a comparison of the relative trends in homelessness across the four countries. The graph has been limited to a 15-year period from 2004 to 2019. Whilst the figures for Denmark, Norway and Sweden refers to all categories of people in homelessness, the numbers for Finland only includes single homeless people, whereas homeless families are not included in the graph, as the number of persons in homeless families is not available for most of the period and numbers thus cannot be added. Yet, the total number of homeless families in Finland is quite small, as only 257 homeless families was recorded in the Finnish count in November 2019, whereas there were 4552 single homeless persons.

The graph shows that besides the difference in the overall rising trend in Denmark and Sweden, and the falling trend in Finland and Norway, some further divergence can be noticed across the countries. At the onset of the period, Finland and Sweden had the highest number of homeless people relative to population size. Thus, previously Finland had a somewhat larger share of homeless people than both Norway and Denmark relative to population size, but the rate in Finland has since then decreased and is now lower than in Denmark. Yet, based on the latest available figures from 2016, Norway has the lowest rate of people in homelessness amongst the four countries although Finland is approaching almost a similar low rate in 2019. Whilst Denmark had the lowest relative rate amongst the countries at the onset of



the Danish counts of homelessness, it has since then surpassed the rates of both Finland and Norway. However the highest rate of homelessness amongst the Nordic countries – also relative to population size – is found in Sweden, where about 3.5 homeless people per 1000 inhabitants were recorded in both the two latest counts in 2011 and 2016. This is a substantially higher rate than in any of the other countries. As previously mentioned the definition of homelessness in Sweden is broader than in the other countries including also people in the secondary housing market, living on non-permanent contracts in municipal sublets, often with conditions attached to the stay. Yet, the higher rate of homeless in Sweden cannot be explained by the absence of this category in the definitions in the three other countries and thus by a narrower definition of homelessness in Denmark, Finland and Norway. By contrast the absence of this category in the three other countries as well as the lower numbers should rather be seen as a reflection of the absence of a similar secondary housing market in these countries. In a wider sense, the differences may likely also reflect the extensive liberalisation of the public housing sectors in Sweden that did not take place in the other countries (where in particular Denmark also has a substantial stock of public housing). Together with the widespread use of the staircase model the liberalisation of public housing reinforced the need for a secondary housing market, due to high entry barriers to housing for vulnerable people in Sweden.

**Figure 1: Homelessness per 1000 inhabitants in the Nordic Countries**



Besides giving information of overall trends, the profiling information available in the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish counts also provide valuable insights into the composition of homelessness in these countries. This information generally shows that homelessness in Denmark, Norway and Sweden is widely concentrated amongst people with complex support needs e.g. due to mental illness and substance abuse problems. The research literature generally associates this pattern with both the extensive welfare systems and the low level of income poverty, which means that homelessness primarily due to poverty and housing affordability problems is less common.

As previously mentioned less detailed profiling information is available in Finland. The basic demographic information collected in Finland show that the share with immigrant background amongst people in a homelessness situation has increased as the share of immigrant population has generally increased in the whole country. There has been some fluctuation in the shares of other categories (young, women, etc.) over the years but no clear patterns emerge as these figures have gone a bit up and down over the years.

Whilst generally showing that homelessness is on a relatively low level (with the exception of Sweden), at the same time the evidence from the Nordic countries shows that even in these countries with extensive welfare systems, people with complex support needs do have a risk of falling through these otherwise comprehensive social safety nets. The persistence of homelessness as a severe form of social marginalisation in these otherwise wealthy and egalitarian countries also explains why the Nordic countries have put considerable effort into producing detailed measurement and data on homelessness for several years.

## **Homelessness Counts and Governance**

---

From a governance perspective, the production of knowledge through standardised categories and enumeration is at the core of the modern state's way of governing (Rose, 1991; Scott, 1998). As Scott (1998) maintains, knowledge of the inhabitants through standardised and quantified categories is essential in state governance. Whilst caution should always be applied as to how definitions and enumerations may shape the understanding and governance of a phenomenon, the homelessness counts in the Nordic countries generate valuable knowledge and figures that define the field and provide tools of steering. In all four countries the data from the counts have been used both as input into the design of homelessness programmes as well as outcome monitoring of the performance of such programmes. The national counts and the data they produce is a monitoring tool that provides feedback to central and local authorities about the performance and

achievements of programmes and other interventions. Although national programmes and strategies are subject to their own evaluations, developments in the number of homeless people are the ultimate feedback on whether the measures are effective and whether local authorities have followed up as expected. Moreover, the count figures are not only used to measure whether the policy has the expected effect, but are also applied to identify groups and specific issues, such as priority groups in the next national programme or initiative. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the counts include a set of variables that can compose and describe specific subgroups, such as young people and families with children, and define these as priority problem categories for the next programme. In Finland, categories, already identified in previous surveys, become part of the definition. Thus it should be noted that quantification itself is a form of legitimacy and the construction of homeless people through definitions and quantification is central to legitimising political priority to groups that come under the definition.

In a broader perspective, the data collection on homelessness in the Nordic countries should also be seen as part of a general tradition of extensive use of data in the Nordic welfare states. National statistics agencies covered by their own legislation are established to collect, store and manage data about the inhabitant and numerous series of different phenomena. Thus the Nordic countries generally have very extensive statistical databases and the address of residence as well as interactions with the extensive welfare system is widely used to collect statistics about the population. However, people experiencing homelessness are characterised by not having a fixed address. To some extent, the authorities in well-organised states such as the Nordic countries can use registers of people who use services for homeless people, such as homeless hostels and the like. However, with the relatively wide definitions of homelessness used in the Nordic counts, statistics based solely on the users of homeless services will be deficient. As we have described in this article, in all four countries, social services and agencies, which take care of those who have fallen through other parts of the safety net, are the main respondents of the homelessness counts. In particular, people who live temporarily with family or friends, who is a very large group in these registrations, only to a limited extent will be registered as users of services targeting homeless persons but will often be known by other agencies and services in the broader welfare system. Thus, the national homelessness counts not only encompass a definition that reflect the broad notion of homelessness in the Nordic countries but also draws upon the existence of the extensive welfare system for enabling the necessary methodology to measure homelessness according to this definition, namely the extended service based counts that is the defining feature of the Nordic homelessness counts.

## Concluding Remarks

---

This article has explored the measurement of homelessness in the Nordic countries. Whilst Denmark, Norway and Sweden follow a widely similar approach collecting individual data on people in a homelessness situation from a wide range of local services and agencies, Finland collects data on homelessness in a somewhat different way as the primary collection and processing takes place at municipal level before data is gathered and further processed at national level. This difference in set up also has more specific methodological implications. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden a comprehensive individual questionnaire is collected for each person in a homelessness situation during the count week, enabling detailed profiling information regarding for instance health and the reasons behind being in a homelessness situation. By contrast, the Finnish data does not include the same kind of detailed profiling information as only a more restricted set of demographic characteristics is recorded for each person. This also reflects that the Finnish data is not based on a specific individual questionnaire but relies on municipalities collecting and combining local administrative data e.g. from the housing and social service sectors.

Despite these principal methodological differences, the national statistics widely enables cross country comparisons, especially since the underlying understandings and definitions of homelessness are very similar. In all four countries, besides rough sleepers and shelter users the definitions also encompass people in hidden homelessness, namely those who stay temporarily with friends and relatives due to the lack of their own place to live. However, one important difference in the definitions regards the main category of people in long-term housing without permanent contracts in the Swedish homelessness definition, reflecting the widespread use of secondary rental contracts in Sweden, which is less common or non-existing in the other countries. This example illustrates how differences in housing and social systems across the countries affects the constitution of homelessness and also how homelessness is defined and measured.

This publication is based upon work from COST Action 15218 - Measuring homelessness in Europe, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu)

## ► References

Benjaminsen, L. and Andrade, S.B. (2015) Testing a Typology of Homelessness across Welfare Regimes: Shelter Use in Denmark and the USA, *Housing Studies* 30(6) pp.858–876.

Benjaminsen, L. and Enemark, M.H. (2017) *Veje ind og ud af hjemløshed* [Pathways in and out of homelessness]. (København: VIVE).

Benjaminsen, L. (2019) *Hjemløshed i Danmark 2019. National kortlægning* [Homelessness in Denmark. National Mapping]. (København: VIVE).

Dyb, E. and Lid, S. (2017) *Bostedsløse i Norge. En kartlegging* [Homelessness in Norway. Mapping]. (Oslo: NIBR).

Dyb, E. (2019) *Færre bostedsløse – hva er forklaringen?* [A Decline in Homelessness – What is the Explanation? ]. NIBR-rapport 2019: 9 (Oslo: OsloMet Oslo Metropolitan University).

Esping-Andersen, G. (Ed.) (1993) *Changing Classes: Stratification and Mobility in Post-industrial Societies* (London: Sage).

Knutagård, M. (2009) *Skälens fångar. Hemlöshetsarbetets organisering, kategoriseringar och förklaringar.* [Prisoners of Reasons: Organization, Categorizations and Explanations of Work with the Homeless]. Dissertation. (Malmö: Égalité).

Knutagård, M. (2018) Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Sweden, *European Journal of Homelessness* 12(2) pp.103-119.

Löfstrand, C. (2005) *Hemlöshetens politik. Lokal policy och praktik* [The Politics of Homelessness. Local Policy and Practice]. Dissertation. (Malmö: Égalité).

NBHP (2019) *Bostadsmarknadsenkäten 2019* [The Housing Market Survey 2019]. <https://www.boverket.se/contentassets/44b828c304f24b46ba69a1f293c24a97/bostadsmarknadsenkaten-2019.pdf>, Accessed on: 2020-02-06

Rose, N. (1991) Governing by Numbers: Figuring out Democracy, *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 16(7) pp.673-692.

Sahlin, I. (1992) *Hemlöshet – reflexioner kring ett begrepp. I: Hemlöshet i Norden* [Homelessness – Reflections about a Concept]. NAD-publikasjon Nr. 22. (Helsinki: NAD).

Sahlin, I. (2005) The Staircase of Transition. Survival through Failure, *Innovation* 18(2) pp.115-135.

Sahlin, I. (2020) Moving Targets: On Reducing Public Responsibilities through Re-categorising Homeless People and Refugees, *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(1) pp.27-54.

Scott, J.C. (1998) *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Conditions Have Failed* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press).

Ulfrstad, M-L. (1997) *Bostedsløshet i Norge. Kartlegging av bostedsløse i kontakt med hjelpeapparatet. Prosjektrapport 216 [Homelessness in Norway. Mapping of Homeless People in Contact with the Support System]*. (Oslo: Norges byggforskningsinstitutt).

Y-Foundation (2017) *A Home of Your Own – Housing First and ending Homelessness in Finland*. (Keuruu: Otava Book Printing Ltd).