



The state of emergency shelters in Denmark

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“Internationally, but also nationally, questions are asked as to why nearly 7,000 people are homeless in a small, but rich welfare state. [...] It must be concluded that general wealth and welfare policies are not the only protection against homelessness.”

Every second year, a national survey in Denmark collects data on the number and profile of homeless people. During the last census, in February 2017, 6,635 homeless people were identified over a period of a week, corresponding to around one person per thousand out of the total Danish population. Based on this number, we may estimate that over the period of a year, about 15,000 persons experience homelessness, whether over shorter or longer periods of time, with homelessness being defined as not having a home. In addition, homeless people often have significant social and mental problems, including misuse of alcohol and/or drugs. Out of the 6,635 homeless persons about 1,200 are of foreign origin with permanent residence permit.

While these figures are quite well-documented, there is more uncertainty about the number of homeless migrants who do not have a permanent residence in Denmark. During the same week in the winter period, about 450 migrants without permanent residence permit were registered as homeless in Denmark.

Internationally, but also nationally, questions are asked as to why nearly 7,000 people are homeless in a small, but rich welfare state. Denmark is amongst the top six European countries (and amongst the top three in the EU) when it comes to GDP per capita, and the social policy has over the past several decades been based on a welfare policy, regardless of which political parties have been in power. It must be concluded that general wealth and welfare policies are not the only protection against homelessness.

Similarly, the fact that ‘Housing First’ has been the official social policy on homelessness for the past 10 years has not helped decrease the number of homeless people. On the contrary, the number of people who are experiencing homelessness in Denmark has steadily increased from 4,998 in 2009, when the first survey took place, to 6,635 in 2017.

From the first half of the 19th century onwards, the traditional and basic social work of helping people who are homeless, was based on the idea of institutionalisation of homeless and poor people, which has taken various forms over time; from poorhouses, labour houses, forced labour houses to shelters and similar kinds of institutions.

One can claim that the DNA of the Danish social work with homeless people, is that people who are homeless must be taken in and offered space in a shelter for homeless people. This fundamental tradition seems to present a serious challenge in making a real shift to a ‘Housing First’ strategy. Additional challenges have influenced the approach, such as high rental prices on the housing market, gentrification of the cities, a high demand for professionalism in the labour market and the complexity of the needs of socially excluded people.

Looking at the current legal basis of offering emergency shelters for homeless people in Denmark, let's highlight ‘The Act on Social Services § 110’, which states: “The municipal council shall provide temporary accommodation in facilities for persons with special problems who have no home or who cannot stay in their own home. Admission to accommodation facilities may be anonymous subject to the applicant’s own application or by referral from public authorities. The principal shall decide on admissions”.

Take note of that it is a law based on a ‘must’ and not a ‘can’. The law obliges the municipalities to ensure that there is always room in a shelter and access to a shelter for homeless people. However, stated earlier in the Act on Social Service, § 3 provides a limit to who benefits from the right to these services; “Any person who is lawfully staying in Denmark is entitled to assistance under this Act”. This is interpreted by lawyers of the Social Ministry as meaning that homeless people with no legal permanent residence cannot be legally offered a bed in the shelters, which operate and are financed under the Act on Social Service. This is the case with the majority of shelters in Denmark.

Such are the legal requirements for the approximately 2.200 shelter beds that are distributed amongst approx. 70 emergency shelters spread across the country. The occupancy rate over the year, is almost 100%, and in the course of a year the 2.200 beds are used by a total of over 6,000 different people, whose occupancy of these beds vary from one night to a whole year. For approximately 1.000 homeless people the length of their stay ranges between 4 months and up to the entire year. It seems that homeless people are circulating between shelters, the street, living with friends and families, and in some cases, prisons or hospitals for determined periods of time.

The Social Act also defines the purpose of a stay in an emergency shelter. It is of course primarily the need of accommodation, but the Act also mentions other services such as activating support, and subsequent assistance. The stay in a shelter is expected to be as short as possible. Nothing is mentioned about care and treatment, which are nevertheless offered in most shelters, which in turn is possibly part of the reason why people end up staying for longer periods of time.

The staff in the shelters function as caretakers, project managers and mediators, and ideally work in cooperation with the municipal case officers. The municipality is responsible for initiating an overall effort, including medical treatment, labor training and search for housing, in collaboration with the homeless person, the shelter and if needed, hospitals and the Department of Prison and Probation.



Thus, each of the 98 Danish municipalities is responsible for ensuring the broad range of services needed and for covering the costs. In this article, focus is on the cost of a citizen's stay in a shelter. The price for a 24-hour stay at a shelter varies in price from shelter to shelter but is normally between 150 to 200 EURO. Quite a few shelters have significantly higher prices because of the special tasks they perform. The user will be charged a modest fee by the shelter as well. This must be seen within a context where people who are homeless and without an address have the right, under the same condition as everybody else, to receive social benefits, as long as they have permanent residency status in Denmark.

A calculation of the total expenses of all the shelters in Denmark result in an approximate cost of around 411,000 EURO per day or 150,000,000 EURO per year. But it is not the municipalities alone that are responsible for the expenses. Half of the expenses are refunded to the municipality by the state. Although there are many good reasons to this, perhaps the foremost is a procedure that stems from a tradition dating back in time. But usually the reasons used for justifying the reimbursement is that it enables a person experiencing homelessness to register at a shelter anywhere in the country without having to go through a lengthy admission process for the stay.

It could be argued that if the municipality were obliged to pay the entire price for the stay, there would be greater commitment to ensuring as short a stay as possible at the emergency shelters, instead using the saved funds to fund better, more stable and more homely places where recovery would become an integral part of the social service, e.g. funding new types of housing, like tiny houses, and putting more effort in ensuring that more affordable flats were available.

Such a strategy could, compared to what is done now, provide more backing and support to the "Housing First" model and thereby help people out of homelessness.

Let's get back to the basics and describe what the Danish shelters look like. Nearly all offer single rooms, where the resident, similarly to a hotel, can stay 24 hours a day and keep the same room during the entire period he/she is living in the shelter. In the newer shelters there is a private toilet and a bathroom attached to each room. In the bigger cities, the shelters are often larger, more worn out and miserable with a larger number of residents, up to 50 - 90 people, who have increased complex social and health problems, compared to the shelters in smaller towns.

At some shelters, there are workplace units where the residents can earn small amounts of money, and where they can test their work capacity and receive different forms of training. Some shelters offer dental services provided by voluntary dentists and some have a small health unit staffed with nurses. There

is no overall plan or strategy as to which services are offered. It depends on each individual shelter, the municipality in which it is located and the traditions of the institution.

You may get the impression that shelters are owned and operated by the municipality as a public institution. This is not the case. About half of the country's shelters are run by private, predominantly faith-based organisations. However, apart from a few small shelters, the majorities of the shelters are fully funded by public, municipal funds and are subject to specific public directives and guidelines and regular supervision. There is no visible difference between a public shelter and one run by faith-based organisations. Both types of shelters employ professional staff and none use volunteers.

The last homeless census shows that 310 people experiencing homelessness are young, aged between 18 and 24, and have stayed in a shelter (the total number of young homeless persons is 1278). A small part of this group used shelters specifically for young people. The number of young homeless people has grown over the past decades. However, most of them find accommodation with friends and relatives without having a fixed address. Other kinds of services should be offered to these young individuals like a place to live including specific support, instead of defining them as homeless and offering them a bed in a shelter for homeless people.

Finally, let's end this tour of the Danish shelter system by looking at the night-shelters which have been established in the last 10-15 years. Some are permanent, others only operate temporarily during the winter-time. The total number of accommodations offered varies from around 100 to 300 beds. Night shelters were set up at a time when some shelter-administrators found some homeless people to be too difficult and disturbing to accept them as residents in the ordinary shelters. Today, most users of these shelters are homeless migrants who have no access to ordinary shelters. These night-shelters are funded by extraordinary state or municipal grants and are not subject to the Social Services Act, or they are funded by private foundations. The funds may be enough to have one paid employee per night shelter, whereas the rest of the staff often are volunteers.

A person wishing to stay in a night shelter must arrive to the shelter each evening and hope for a place for the night, which is often a mattress on the floor in dormitories. In the morning a cup of tea and bread is served with cheese, but the guests must leave early and spend another hard day in the streets. There is no guarantee for shelter and migrants often end up sleeping on the streets.

Is it not time that we found the will to secure all people, including migrants, experiencing homelessness, a safe place to sleep?