

In presenting a handful of case studies, Ana Maria Cioraru and Katrine Sanaker demonstrate the value of making and maintaining contact with those furthest from public institutions and social services. Even though an outreach worker can't always provide an immediate solution they can always listen.

# POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF OUTREACH WORK WITH HOMELESS MIGRANTS IN COPENHAGEN



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According to the last analysis of the Danish Research and Analysis of Welfare Centre, in 2019, there were 6,431 homeless people living in Denmark. Not included in this number are a further 519 unregistered homeless migrants.<sup>1</sup> Getting a full picture of how many unregistered homeless migrants make a living in Copenhagen, on and off the streets, can be a difficult task. They rarely make contact with the municipality or other public authorities. They have limited access to established all-year round shelters, and therefore sleep rough in parks, parking lots, camping sites, construction sites or informal accommodation arrangements in crowded houses.

In 2016, Kompasset,<sup>2</sup> with funding from FEAD,<sup>3</sup> set a team of multi-lingual outreach workers on the street. It was an attempt to expand our levels of intervention, namely by seeking contact with people who might not otherwise come into contact with services that can provide assistance. The great majority of these people are homeless mobile EU citizens, in particular, Eastern European migrants without registration in Denmark. We aim to ensure that as many homeless migrants as possible have access to advice, information, and support as soon as they arrive in Copenhagen. Their everyday life on the streets presents a series of very particular challenges. Access to medical assistance is limited outside of acute assistance.<sup>4</sup> Even though the majority of them come here looking for a job, the highly regulated job-market remains out of reach for a person with little to no education or work

1 <https://www.vive.dk/da/temaer/hjemloeshed/>

2 A department of Kirkens Korshær that support destitute mobile EU citizens without social number. <https://kbh.kirkenskorshaer.dk/sted/kompasset/>

3 Fund for European Aid for the Most Deprived

4 According to danish law, people without permanent residence are entitled to “acute assistance” (Sundhedsloven, 2019, §80, <https://www.elov.dk/sundhedsloven/80/>). It is not specified in the law what “acute” covers and do not cover, and this is left up to the health professionals evaluation.

experience. This, in turn, presents an administrative challenge, as a job contract remains the basis upon which one can obtain a regular residency permit in Denmark. They often resort to collecting bottles, selling homeless magazines, busking, or begging. Most often they engage in at least two of these income generating activities to render as much profit as possible. These activities are, however, not enough to help them register in Denmark.

By being present on the street, the outreach team of Kompasset try to make ourselves as available as possible, respond to some of the needs we encounter on the spot, and model our response accordingly. The relationships we build are also a way to effectively bridge to other services and offers.

“During our daily outreach rounds in the city, we get approached by many people who ask us how to avoid situations where they risk being fined or imprisoned.”

## Case 1

*On a cold January night we met a Romanian man, in his mid-50s, sleeping outside a business entrance. For the next couple of months, we kept returning to the same spot, making contact and following up on his situation. We eventually learnt that he suffers from dementia as well as having an alcohol dependency. He only spoke Romanian, had lived on the streets in Romania prior to his travel to Denmark and had no next-of-kin. One night we had to call the ambulance for him. He was diagnosed with TB and was put on a long treatment. Due to his dementia and alcohol addiction, he would regularly leave the hospital and interrupt the treatment, often getting lost. Every time this happened, we went looking for him, and relied on our relationship with him to assist his return to the hospital and re-start the treatment. Additionally, we visited him often and remained his “contact persons” throughout his hospitalisation. However, due to him not being registered in Denmark, his right to medical help and follow-up remained limited, outside of that which is life-threatening. He was not deemed to be in the target group of most shelters. In the context of the Covid19 pandemic, having him transferred to a hospital in Romania was not possible. In collaboration with the Romanian Embassy and the Copenhagen Municipality, it was possible eventually to help him return to Romania, to a sanatorium.*

While some people fall outside the scope of the law, others have been the direct targets of its application. We have met many people who were negatively affected by the so-called “camping law” (§3 stk 4. of the Law on Public Order). Under this law, people could get fined and receive a “zone ban” if they were found to be sleeping in what was deemed to be a camp which can create discomfort.<sup>5</sup> This paragraph, paired with two other paragraphs from the Law on Public Order, severely limits the possibilities of homeless people to find a place to sleep, without being penalised. During our daily outreach rounds in the city, we get approached by many people who ask us how to avoid situations where they risk being fined or imprisoned.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20201/almdel/REU/bilag/261/2360148/index.htm>

## Case 2

An EU citizen comes to us because he wants to know where he can safely sleep at night, without getting in trouble with the police. We cannot send him to a shelter as there are no places open during the summer months where he fits the description of the target group. Most parks are closed off at night or have regulations that make it illegal to sleep in them.<sup>6</sup> If he seeks a covered place to be sheltered - an obvious place being the entrance area of a closed shop - he risks being fined for “blocking an entrance”.<sup>7</sup> If he sleeps together with friends or family to avoid being alone and vulnerable on the street, it can be seen as a camp. He is worried about sleeping in a place where he is too visible to people and the police, but also afraid to sleep in a hidden place where he can be an easier target for robbery or assault. We have tried referring him to an official camping spot, as he is willing to pay what is for him a high price in order to sleep in a safe place. At the campsite they tell him that they do not have space, even though the camp is, and remains, half-full. At this point we are running out of options.

The system seems to operate in a way where there is no winning. We do not know how many times we have spoken the words “It is not illegal to sleep on the street in Denmark, but...”. And we often meet people who have been approached by the police when sleeping outside.

<sup>6</sup> Ordensbekendtgørelsen § 16: <https://www.elov.dk/ordensbekendtgorelsen/16/>

<sup>7</sup> Ordensbekendtgørelsen § 7 <https://www.elov.dk/ordensbekendtgorelsen/7/>

## Case 3

A man has received a fine of 1000 kr (135 euro), for blocking an entrance.<sup>8</sup> During a longer conversation he opens up and tells us how this fine affects him and his family. He is in Denmark earning money by collecting bottles for return money. He tells us that he manages to send 100-200kr (13-27 euro) to his wife and three children in Romania every week, money that he is very grateful for. With a hint of resignation in his voice, he tells us that he feels he was turned into a criminal for rolling out his sleeping bag in the wrong place. He describes his experience, being held at the police station for 3-4 hours, where all he could think about was that if he gets arrested, he will not be able to send money to his wife and 2 children. This fine represents the equivalent of 5-10 times the amount of money he sends each week. He feels that he no longer has clean slates with the Danish system, as he is not able to pay the full amount of the fine. In July this year, we helped apply for a reduction of the fine based on the man’s low income. We have succeeded in doing so in other cases, but this time the application was declined on the basis that he was not registered in the tax register.

These two cases, are representative of the way in which strict laws and policies, negatively impact the lives of homeless migrants in Copenhagen. They also show that we are sometimes limited in what answers we can give. Regardless, we find that it sometimes also helps to just listen. Many of the people we talk to doing outreach would not

<sup>8</sup> Ordensbekendtgørelsen § 7 <https://www.elov.dk/ordensbekendtgorelsen/7/>

themselves approach existing social offers to get information about such fines, seek to challenge them, or to have them reduced. Since 2016, we have forwarded a number of cases to lawyers, who are willing to take cases that challenge the increasingly restrictive laws affecting homeless people.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the experience from our outreach team, we want to argue the importance of having professionals on the ground to meet people where they are. It is paramount to make and maintain contact with the most vulnerable and isolated individuals. These are the ones that do not themselves find their way to already established public institutions or social offers from the NGO sector and therefore are not always aware of their rights.

Even when we cannot come with solutions to the issues they face, we can make ourselves available to support and listen to their frustrations. When possible, we can bring the cases forward and lobby for policy change. At the same time, we believe it is extremely important to gain an overview of the different challenges and have a clear understanding of the needs of the people and to use that in building effective cooperation with other organisations or public institutions. We have experienced that some people can only be met, and some information can only be obtained, through stable presence on the street and by speaking the same language as the migrants.

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