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Curbing homelessness in Norway

The housing standard in Norway is uniformly high, and the number of homeless people is low compared with most countries in the world. Nonetheless, there is need for a strategic public effort to combat and prevent homelessness.

By Gunnar Sveri

After this article was written, a census of homeless people in Norway 2003 has been published by the NBI. The number of homeless people has been reduced from 6200 to 5200.

The reduction refers to Oslo and to homeless people with minor problems. The rest of the country is more or less unchanged.

In 1997 the Norwegian Building Research Institute conducted a census of homeless people in Norway. The total number of homeless was put at 6 200. A new census is under way and will be published in June 2004. There is considerable interest in how the situation has developed since 1997.

The 1997 results showed that Norway as a whole had 1.4 homeless people per 1 000 inhabitants, but the variation from municipality to municipality was significant. Some municipalities reported no homelessness at all, while Oslo had an estimated 5.22 homeless people per 1 000 inhabitants. In terms of averages, the results were as follows:

Municipalities of more than 40 000 inhabitants:	3.1 per 1 000
Municipalities with 10 000-39 000 inhabitants:	0.63 per 1 000
Municipalities with fewer than 10 000 inhabitants:	0.36 per 1 000

Statistics regarding the homeless

Of the total homeless surveyed, 76 per cent were men and 24 per cent women. A large majority of the homeless were under 40 years of age. Almost 90 per cent were under 50. The proportion of homeless women was greatest for the youngest age group, which may indicate that the number of homeless women is on the rise.

82 per cent of Norway's homeless were born in this country. Four per cent were from the rest of Europe and North America, while 13 per cent were described as representing non-Western cultures.

At the time of the survey, 37 per cent of the homeless were staying in treatment centres, prisons, jails or related forms of temporary shelter. 25 per cent were staying temporarily with acquaintances. Nine per cent found different places to sleep from night to night. 19 per cent stayed in hospices or camp-site cabins. Five per cent were on the streets. The means of shelter for the remaining five per cent were not given.

According to the survey, 61 per cent of those without a permanent home had a problem with drugs or alcohol, while 24 per cent suffered from mental illness. Nine per cent did not suffer from mental problems, were not substance abusers and had not been in a treatment institution. Of these, 55 per cent were born in a non-Nordic country. Several other surveys have shown that some immigrants experience homelessness for a period after arriving in Norway.

Project Homeless

Report No. 50 (1998-99) to the Storting (Norway's national assembly) on equitable distribution cast light on the problems of the homeless in Norway and proposed various measures vis-à-vis this group. This led to "Project Homeless", a collaborative effort by

the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development and the Norwegian State Housing Bank.

Project Homeless was launched in 2001 and will be concluded in 2004. The object has been to develop methods and models for countering homelessness. The project has already shown positive results, with formerly homeless people having established themselves in flats or houses with follow-up residential support.

The 1997 census over the homeless included an assessment of relevant housing and follow-up needs from which the following conclusions were drawn:

- One-third of the homeless will be able to live successfully in a home of their own.
- One-third will need a home with professional follow-up.
- One-third will need treatment or other forms of comprehensive professional support.

Initially, the project targeted homeless people in need of professional follow-up care. Measures were aimed at the weakest groups, who had no place to stay and had been living beyond the reach of the ordinary public support mechanisms. The target group was later re-defined as homeless people requiring assistance, but in practice the test measures have been directed at those with the fewest resources.

Where the neediest members of society are concerned, homelessness can be portrayed as part of a vicious circle in which the individual is caught in a loop of unsatisfactory living arrangements with no follow-up, treatment institutions or incarceration, and outright homelessness. One of the goals of Project Homeless is to design national methods and models to end this vicious circle.

Participants in the project

The Norwegian State Housing Bank is responsible for the project and administers it from within its organisation. Nationally, a contact group has been set up with representatives from the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs.

Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger, Kris-



tiansand, Drammen and Tromsø all take part in the project at the municipal level. These cities account for 25 per cent of the country's total population but 70 per cent of its homeless. Several non-governmental organisations (e.g. the Salvation Army and other church-related services) participate in measures in the project cities. Each city has a local steering committee with representatives from municipal administration, health and social services, housing services and the regional offices of the Norwegian State Housing Bank.

Bildetekst?



Altogether within Project Homeless, 30 subprojects have been set up to serve 230 residents. The dwellings used are for the most part normal flats, some of which are situated together while others are located within ordinary residential districts. There are also some housing collectives with shared living areas, including kitchens and bathrooms.

Special teams offer the professional support needed. Most of them are based within the residences they serve, though some have responsibility for visiting additional sites.

In addition to helping administer these efforts, the municipalities have drawn up their own strategies for combating homelessness. These encompass preventative measures as well as models for enabling the homeless to establish a home.

Attitude toward the homeless

Project Homeless has led to greater acceptance of the view that even homeless people suffering from alcohol and drug problems or mental illness are entitled to social services and a place to live. The participating municipalities have been able to proceed on the shared assumption that everyone, even those of the fringes of society, has a right to a home.

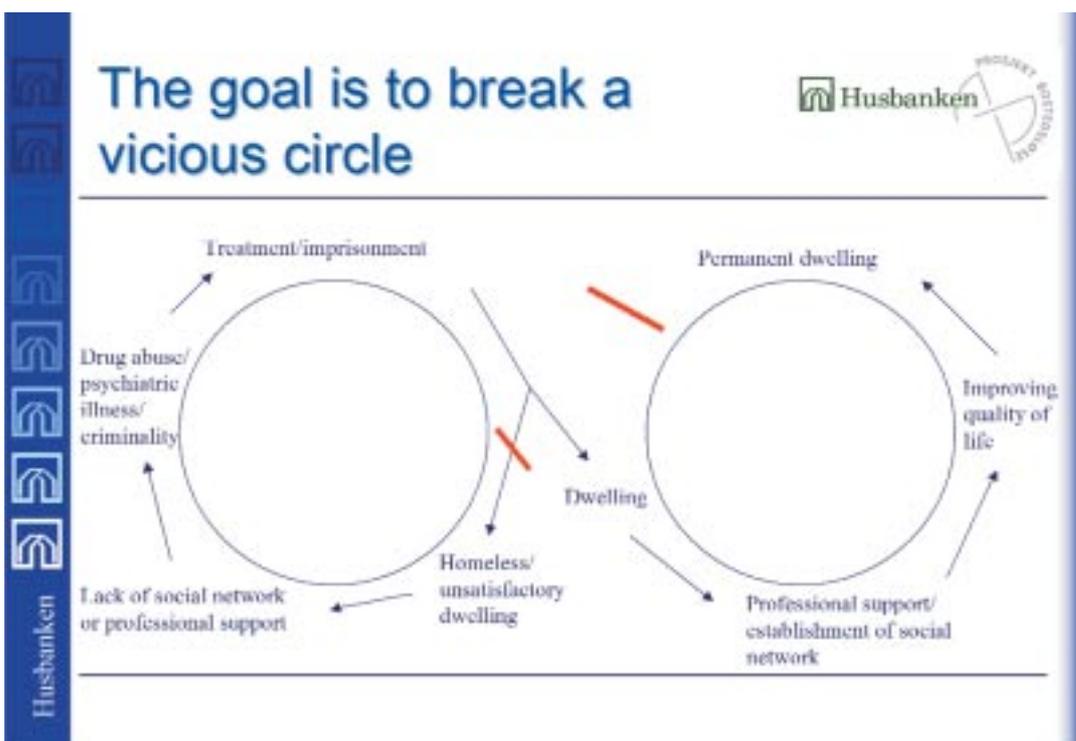
Raising the competence level

Project Homeless has also established a new, college-level educational programme combining housing and social services. The programme is open to health- and social-sector employees of participating municipalities as well as members of non-governmental organisations and the Norwegian State Housing Bank. Within Norway, this is a pioneering educational programme, and the first 46 students have recently completed their exams.

Shorter training programmes are also being developed to heighten housing-related expertise among employees associated with the project. In addition, course modules that combine housing and social-service topics are being prepared for use in existing academic programmes.

Collaboration with NGOs

A goal from the start has been to engage non-governmental organisations in the project. A complication emerged with regard to Norway's competitive-procurement rules for public bodies, but temporary dispensation



was obtained to permit NGOs to provide social and health services. Project administrators continue to address the issue through collaborative models.

Project results

The target group members associated with the project are all contending with problems in addition to homelessness, and some have not had their own homes in a long time. So if the purpose of the project was to ensure problem-free implementation of all measures, the administrators should probably have chosen a different target group.

Nonetheless, most of the people served by the project have remained in their new living quarters. Experience in the final year of the project suggests strongly that a home combined with systematic professional support improves the quality of life for previously homeless people.

Neighbours often mount protests when plans are announced to house homeless people nearby. However, once the new residents move in, the complaints generally die down. People who were previously homeless cause no more trouble to their neighbours than do other aspects of neighbourhood life.

Regular, private flats with a living room, kitchen and bath/WC function significantly better than residential collectives with shared facilities. Likewise, when multiple flats for the homeless are situated together, the occu-

pants should be allowed to choose the degree to which they wish to socialise with one another.

The expertise of professional follow-up workers is important to achieving success, as is a consistent approach from one worker to the next. So, too, is the composition of new households. If several high-strung people live together, their overall affect as a group can be more aggressive.

Strategy against homelessness, 2005–2007

In a recent white paper on housing policy (Report No. 23, 2003–2004), the government proposes a strategy for combating homelessness in the period 2005 to 2007. The government's goal is ambitious, and will require a major effort from state, municipal and non-governmental agencies. The white paper will be debated by the Storting in the autumn of 2004. The proposed strategy builds upon Project Homeless, and recommends the Norwegian State Housing Bank as the state institution assigned to coordinate Norway's continuing effort to help the homeless.

The white paper takes inspiration from a vision of "good, safe housing for all." The mission it lays out is "to provide housing in the market for people of difficult circumstances." The following general goals and performance targets are proposed:

General goals	Performance targets
<p>Help prevent people from becoming homeless.</p> <p>Contribute to good quality in overnight shelters.</p> <p>Help ensure homeless people rapid offers of permanent housing.</p>	<p>Number of eviction petitions to be reduced by 50 per cent, and evictions by 30 per cent.</p> <p>No one shall have to seek temporary housing upon release from jail or prison.</p> <p>No one shall have to seek temporary housing after release from a treatment institution.</p> <p>No one shall be offered overnight shelter that does not meet agreed quality standards.</p> <p>No one shall stay more than three months in temporary housing.</p>