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Homeless in Norway

- A survey

Summary NIBR Report 2009:17



NIBR

Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research

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The report sets out and discusses the findings of the fourth nationwide survey of homelessness in Norway. The survey was conducted autumn 2008. Similar surveys were carried out in 2005, 2003 and 1996. The Norwegian State Housing Bank commissioned the surveys.

Defining homelessness

The definition used for this and the three earlier surveys is as follows:

A person is homeless when s/he lacks a place to live, either rented or owned, and finds themselves in one of the three following situations:

- Has no place to stay for the night
- Is referred to emergency or temporary shelter accommodation
- Is a ward of the correctional and probation service and due to be released in two months at the latest
- Is a resident of an institution and due to be discharged in two months at the latest
- Lives with friends, acquaintances or family on a temporary basis

Persons living in sublet accommodation or residing permanently with family and close relations are not covered by the definition. See chapter 1 for a detailed review of the definition.

Method

Chapter 2 details the survey's method and discusses its advantages and drawbacks. The chapter also discusses the response rate. The study is a survey of homeless persons in contact with the health and welfare authorities and other relevant organisations/agencies known or assumed to be in contact with or have information on homeless persons. These make up the survey's respondents. The second stage is the actual survey of homeless persons.

Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire on every homeless person known to them. The survey is a cross-sectional study and was conducted in the last week of November 2008. It paints a picture of homelessness in Norway in that week.

We can divide the respondents – 1,292 official bodies – into a municipal and a national sample. The municipal sample comprises one hundred municipalities and includes all municipalities with a population of at least 40,000 and a representative selection of municipalities with fewer residents. The nationwide sample comprises departments of health enterprises, probation authorities, crisis centres and certain multi-municipal authorities. The method generates duplicate reports. About 10 per cent of homeless persons are registered twice or more. After identifying duplicates by their initials, day and year of birth, and other records they were removed from the data set.

Number of homeless persons

Chapter 3 presents the figures on homeless persons for the country as a whole and for all municipalities with a population of 10,000 residents or more. The table below shows the number of homeless individuals and rate per 1,000 population nationally and in four municipal categories for all four surveys.

Number of homeless individuals and rate per 1,000 pop. nationally and by municipal category and year

Year	Nationwide		4 major cities		>40,000		10,000–39,999		<9,999	
	No.	Per 1,000 pop.	No.	Per 1,000 pop.	No.	Per 1,000 pop.	No.	Per 1,000 pop.	No.	Per 1,000 pop.
2008	6,091	1.27	2,632	2.36	1,164	1.35	1,724	1.07	570	0.48
2005	5,496	1.19	2,419	2.42	973	1.17	1,610	1.06	395	0.32
2003	5,200	1.14	2,604	2.56	1,101	1.35	1,193	0.78	336	0.27
1996	6,200	1.50	3,843	4.01		1.53		0.63		0.36

Summarising the 2008 figures and comparing with figures from 2005, we see that the number of homeless persons in Norway as a whole in the last week of November 2008 was 6,091, or 1.27 homeless individuals per 1,000 population. This is 10 per cent higher than the last survey in 2005. However because the population has increased in the period, the actual increase is 7 percent. The four largest cities have a total of 2,632 homeless persons. Oslo has 1,526 (2.65 per 1000 pop.), Bergen 669 (2.66 per 1000 pop.), Trondheim 223 (1.23 per 1000 pop.) and Stavanger 215 (1.77 per 1000 pop.).

We obtained the number of homeless persons by two processes of weighting. As with the earlier surveys, some of our respondents opted out. One special feature of this survey is first its aim to calculate the actual number of homeless people. It is the only source of information on the number of homeless persons in Norway. The data are therefore weighted to account for non-respondents. The assumption behind the weighting says that the number of homeless persons known to or in contact with non-respondents was half that of the respondents. We know that some of the non-respondents know of or about more or less as many homeless people as the officials who did complete the questionnaire. The estimate is therefore a minimum. The other form of weighting compensates for the sample of municipalities with populations below 40,000. The procedures are detailed in chapter 3.

In municipalities with >40,000 residents, the overall figure is 1,164 homeless individuals (1.35 per 1000 pop.). In municipalities with populations in the 10,000–39,999 range, the overall figure comes

out as 1,724 (1.07 per 1000 pop.). The group containing the smallest municipalities – with populations <9,999 – had a total of 570 homeless individuals (0.48 per 1000 pop.). Taken together, the major cities saw a decline in the number of homeless people after 2005, while the next group of municipalities saw numbers rise. Figures for every municipality from each of the four surveys are set out in appendix 1.

Demographic profile

Chapter 4 gives an account of age and sex ratios, country of birth, sources of income and family status of homeless individuals. 73 per cent are male, 27 per cent female. The female percentage is slightly higher than the 2005 figure. The age profile is the opposite of the age profile of the population as a whole. Average age is 35; one in four is under 25, and 6 per cent 55 or older. The percentage of young homeless people – under 25 – has been growing since 1996. This group is over-represented in the smaller municipalities. About half of all homeless individuals have been homeless for a long time: 20 per cent intermittently homeless for a period of several years; 25 per cent homeless for more than six months.

The great majority of the homeless (81 per cent) was born in Norway. The next largest group is people of African origin (7 per cent), followed by Asia (5 per cent). Persons stemming from other Nordic countries, from Europe and North-America account for 4 per cent, and 1 per cent comes from South and Central America. The percentage of foreign-born homeless people in Oslo is markedly higher than in the other municipalities: as much as 18 per cent of Oslo's homeless population were born in Africa. The percentage of foreign-born homeless individuals in the other municipalities varies between 4 and 18 per cent. The percentage of foreign-born homeless individuals is the same as in 2005.

The educational achievements of 52 per cent include upper secondary school with a trade proficiency certificate. The level of education of 4 per cent extends beyond upper secondary school. The educational status of homeless people is much lower than the average Norwegian. There is a small but systematic increase from the first survey and continuing through to this one. The question on education level received a relatively poor response: 44 per cent ticked “don't know” or left the question unanswered.

Social benefits are the main source of income of 40 per cent, and the main source of income overall among the homeless population. A slightly lower percentage, 37, receives a pension of some kind. Of these, 23 per cent receive a disability or old age pension and 14 per cent some form of rehabilitation benefit. 8 per cent earn a wage, are on unemployment benefit or draw a sickness allowance. All three forms of income are work related. There is a clear and systematic decline in the percentage of homeless people on social assistance over the four surveys and a rise in the percentage of pension recipients. One should approach this difference in light of efforts to reduce and prevent homelessness. Having a place to live means for many an opportunity to apply for – and be obtain – a pension.

Most homeless individuals – 88 per cent – are single. This figure includes divorcees and former cohabiters. The percentage of single individuals rose slightly from 1996 to 2003, but has stayed at exactly the same level ever since. More than a quarter of all homeless people have children under 18. 16 per cent of these parents have full or shared custody of their children. There are significantly more homeless mothers than homeless fathers who care for children on a daily basis. 32 per cent of all parents have access rights. 378 children are homeless, together with their parents. This figure is not weighted, unlike the homelessness figure. In other words, the number of homeless children in the custody of homeless parents is almost certainly higher.

Location

The definition of homelessness is the starting point for finding out where homeless people stay. The definition extends much further than those individuals who sleep rough, the commonplace notion of the homeless person. The largest group – 37 per cent – lives temporarily with friends, acquaintances and relatives. Homeless people are more likely to live with friends, acquaintances and relatives in small municipalities. One in every four (23 per cent) lives in temporary accommodation, i.e., overnight shelter, hostels, bed-and-breakfasts, campground cabins, etc. 17 per cent are institutionalised but due to be discharged within a two-month timeframe. 5 per cent live rough or use various emergency facilities with severely limited opening hours. 3 per cent are accommodated at crisis centres. It should be made clear: not all crisis centre

residents count as homeless, only those that satisfy the definition's criteria.

The study found a systematic variation in the type of shelter used by young and old homeless individuals. Over half of the under 25s live with friends, acquaintances or family, but only 15 per cent of the oldest individuals, aged 65 and over. A minority of the youngest age group lives in temporary accommodation. The proportion living in temporary accommodation co-varies with increasing age, and around 40 per cent of those aged 55 and over have such provisional arrangements. The age gap grows even wider on the use of emergency shelters. The proportion of older homeless individuals (55 and older) that spend the night in emergency accommodation is three times as high as younger individuals (under 35). 12 per cent had been in the same situation for up to three weeks before the data were recorded; 42 per cent between three weeks and six months; and 41 per cent in excess of six months.

The number of homeless individuals living in institutions or as wards of the probation service is the same as it was in 2005. The proportion staying with friends, acquaintances or family fell while the percentage using emergency shelters rose relative to 2005 figures. We found no systematic differences or tendencies relative to type of accommodation after comparing data from all four surveys.

We were particularly interested to see where homeless parents stayed, and we concentrate here on parents with children to look after. This group is also more likely than others to be living with friends, acquaintances and family for the time being. A large percentage of this group (30 per cent) are housed in crisis centres. One in every four with shared custody is a ward of the probation service. 14 per cent with full custody and 7 per cent with share custody use temporary accommodation. No parent with responsibility for children lives rough or uses emergency shelters. The place and duration of the stay are described and discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

Homeless for how long?

Chapter 6 explores the duration of homelessness beyond the current situation in which the person found themselves at the

point of the survey. Homelessness for the majority has been a relatively persistent state. Nearly one in four had been homeless for more than six months, and one in three intermittently over a period of several years. One in four experience homelessness as one more acute problem. We find unmistakable differences between municipalities. Homelessness in the major municipalities is much more likely to last for years, and the percentage for whom homelessness is the next acute problem is significantly higher as well.

The duration question was not posed until the 2003 survey. We found that the percentage of those affected by homelessness over several years fell between 2003 and 2008, while the number of those experiencing homelessness as a fresh acute problem rose in the same period. The intermediate category, homeless for more than six months, is basically unchanged.

Females are more likely than males to face acute homelessness (20 per cent and 31 per cent respectively), but males are more likely to fall into the long-term homeless category. Not unexpectedly, we find clear age differences. Acute homelessness is much more likely to affect members of the younger age group, but they are less likely to remain homeless over several years than the older age group. More than one in five of those under 25 were intermittently homeless for a period of several years. Long-lasting homelessness – several years – is more common among people born in Norway.

The final section of chapter 6 looks at the duration of homelessness of people with full or shared custody of children. More than half of this group fall into the category of acute homelessness. 13 per cent of homeless parents with children to care for on a daily basis had been homeless for more than six months and 14 per cent had faced homelessness intermittently for several years. Of parents with shared custody, the figures are 20 per cent (more than six months) and 12 per cent (intermittently over several years). We might also mention that one in three with access rights had been homeless for several years.

Substance abuse and health

Most homeless people (59 per cent) are addicted to drugs or alcohol. The changes in percentages over the years are slight. 20 per cent have no such addiction. With regard to the remaining 20

per cent, respondents have left the addiction question unanswered or indicated 'don't know'. Most of the addicted individuals use drugs including pills, but a not insignificant minority use both alcohol and drugs.

The prevalence of substance dependency is much higher among homeless males, and dependency tends to co-vary with duration of homelessness: four in five long-term (several years) homeless people are addicted to drugs/alcohol compared with two in five cases of acute homelessness. The younger age group is less likely to suffer dependency, and the type of substance used is also age-dependent. Three in four of the age-group 65 and over are addicted to alcohol, ethanol and/or solvents, while drugs prevail in all other age groups. Substance addiction occurs primarily among homeless persons born in Norway, and least among homeless persons born in Asia.

One in three has a recognised or visible mental illness. Mental illness is more likely among the long-term homeless. 40 per cent of the intermittent homeless over several years are registered with a mental illness, and 29 per cent of the acute homeless group likewise. A quarter have a mental illness and are dependent on drugs/alcohol.

10 per cent are registered with a somatic condition or disability. We believe this figure is far too conservative. Both addiction and homelessness are significant causes of sometimes serious health problems. One could ask whether the homeless use the health services less than they could and should, and whether their health problems go unnoticed by the health and welfare authorities etc. Substance abuse and health are discussed in chapter 7.

Problematic situations

The survey included nine fresh questions about various problems likely to face the homeless. Percentages affected by these problems and situations are shown in figure 8.1, and the relations between them are discussed in detail in chapter 8. Some of the findings deserve special mention, however. The most important reason people become homeless is because of a broken relationship or family conflict. 18 per cent, more than 900 people, lost their home for this reason, and it is more likely to affect the younger age group. Also the youngest age group, 18 and younger, have lost a

roof over their head due to foundering relationships and family disputes.

One in four had been evicted in the six months leading up to the survey. 8 per cent had lost their home after defaulting on rent or mortgage payments. There was a degree of overlapping between defaulters and people who had been evicted. Two in four who had lost their home through defaulting had also been evicted. Eviction is also associated, or is coincidental with other situations, such as homelessness due to injury/disturbance/conflict, moving out because of bullying/discrimination, or because domestic violence forces a person to leave or causes them to be evicted. The principal cause of eviction is generally assumed to be rent arrears. The results of this study should help to nuance this assumption.

We would also like to make the point that homeless individuals with responsibility for offspring have also been evicted or for various reasons have lost their home. In other words, children suffer from evictions and loss of home, or from non-voluntary moves.

A further point needs stressing and concerns problems caused by debt. 15 per cent owe considerable sums and/or are victims of debt (*gjeldsoffer*). Whether 15 per cent comprises a large group or not is an open question. We don't know whether debt caused the people to lose their homes, but high levels of debt make it more difficult to acquire a new permanent place to live. And in all likelihood, the respondents probably had limited information on the debt status of the homeless. We would assume that unsecured or unofficial loans are a hidden problem.

Summary

The survey of homeless people has generated a wealth of detailed information. While the present analysis is far from exhaustive, the report still contains very many figures and information. Chapter 9 reviews the study in brief, recalls the main findings and puts them into a slightly wider context.