

Summary

Evelyn Dyb and Katja Johannessen

Homelessness in Norway 2012 – A survey

NIBR Report 2013:5

This report is an analysis of a survey of homeless people in Norway. The information on which the report is based comes from a survey of officials in public and private organizations and agencies at the local and national level who have contact with, knowledge of or are assumed to have knowledge of homeless people. They are the survey's respondents. They have completed a form for every homeless person they know of at a given point in time. The point in time in question was a week in late November, early December (week 48) 2012. The homelessness survey is cross-sectional, it indicates how many people were homeless in a particular week and what characterizes this group of people. The summary presents the key findings of the 2012 survey. Almost identical surveys have been conducted four times previously, in 2008, 2005, 2003 and 1996.

The number of homeless persons

There were 6,259 homeless persons in Norway in 2012, which corresponds to 1.26 per 1,000 pop. Compared with 2008, the number had grown very slightly, but the population of Norway also grew in the same period, and the 2012 percentage of homeless persons is just short of the 2008 level, 1.27 per 1,000 pop. The survey of homeless people was conducted in 124 municipalities: all municipalities with over 40,000 inhabitants, and a representative sample of municipalities with fewer than 40,000 inhabitants. For analytical reasons, we divided the municipalities into four groups: 1) the four major cities; 2) 40,000 and above (minus the major cities); 3) 10,000-39,999; and 4) under 10,000 inhabitants.

Homelessness is more prevalent in large municipalities than in smaller ones. 2,637 homeless persons (42 per cent of the total) live in one of the four major cities: Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Stavanger. Homelessness per 1,000 pop. in these four cities is 2.23. In all, there were 1,415 homeless persons in municipalities with >40,000 pop., and 1.43 per 1,000 pop. Municipalities with 10,000–39,999 inhabitants had 1,737 homeless persons, or 1.06 per 1,000 pop. In the smaller municipalities – with populations under 10,000 – 470 homeless person were counted during the registration week, corresponding 0.4 per 1,000 pop.

The figures cited in the paragraph above were collected for each of the four municipality groups. The number of homeless people, and homelessness as a proportion of the population in each municipality are presented in the chapters dealing with each of the groups of municipalities. It is important to remember here that what we have here is a sample of municipalities with populations below 40,000, and consequently we only have figures for the municipalities in the sample. The number of homeless persons varies widely from municipality to municipality of about the same size. There are several explanations for this variation. The simple explanation is that the prevalence of homelessness varies in otherwise comparable municipalities. Another explanation is that the municipalities with the highest homelessness rates have done better at reporting the figures. The number of respondents in each municipality who took part in the survey also varied. (The number of survey participants is not the same as the response rate; some respondents replied that they could not / didn't have the time / didn't have the opportunity to participate). The general pattern is that the number of respondents in each municipality who participated in the survey co-varies with the number of homeless persons reported for the municipality. Loss of respondents is weighted for to an extent, but the weighting is "cautious" and likely does not weigh up for respondent loss and non-participation. Especially in the group with the smallest municipalities (<10,000 pop.), there is reason to believe that the number of registered homeless people is clearly lower than the actual number in these municipalities. Response rate and weighting are discussed in the methodology section of Chapter 1 and in greater detail in Annex 1 (at the end of the report).

Characteristics of homelessness

Most homeless people are male, only three out of ten are female. Homeless people are younger than the general population. A large group, one in four, is under 25. Over half are between 25 and 45. There is only a small group of older homeless people. All homelessness surveys, including this one, lack information on the educational achievements of homeless people. That notwithstanding, the results are robust enough for us to conclude that educational levels among homeless people are much lower compared with the general population. 38 per cent have completed compulsory primary and secondary education, compared with 29 per cent of the general population over 16.

Homeless people's dominant source of income is, and has been since the first survey was done in 1996, social assistance. The percentage whose main source of income is social assistance has fallen in each of the five surveys. In 1996, over half lived on social assistance, while in 2012 the percentage was 38. Social assistance has been replaced by other government schemes, pensions and the work assessment allowance. In 2012, a large group of homeless people lived on the work assessment allowance. Homeless people belong to a group with few ties to the labour market. Under 10 per cent have an income from work in some form, and this figure has remained relatively constant since 1996.

Homeless people have no home of their own. It is one of the hallmarks of homelessness. But it is naturally important to identify where homeless people live. The most common alternative is with friends, acquaintances and relatives on a temporary basis (39 per cent). The second most prevalent is temporary accommodation, which covers a number of alternatives from residential shelters and housing provided specifically for homeless people, to caravan sites, hotels and bed and breakfasts aimed primarily at the tourist market. One in four homeless people live in temporary accommodation. Fifteen per cent live in some form of institution and 7 per cent are in prison or under the care of the correctional services. People in institutions or prisons are homeless if they are discharged/ released within two months and have no place of their own to go to. A small group (5 per cent) stay in overnight shelters and spend the whole or parts of the day outside, or have no accommodation at all (i.e. live rough). The actual number for the

country as a whole is something in excess of 300, though there is likely to be a high level of circulation where people alternate among the very worst alternatives, and the number of homeless people having recourse to overnight shelters or who at one time or another have no roof over their head can fluctuate significantly over the course of a year. Over half (57 per cent) had stayed in the same alternative for more than three months.

Most of the homeless people have a history of homelessness. 31 per cent had been homeless on and off for several years, while 25 per cent had been homeless for more than six months. We can characterize these individuals as long-term homeless. For 22 per cent, homelessness is experienced as a new acute problem. A large group is registered under “other”: either the respondent doesn’t know the answer, or has left the question unanswered.

Marital status, family relations and place affiliations

Nine out of ten homeless people are single. The percentage of singles is higher among men than women. There is almost no difference in the proportion of single and married/cohabiting couples in the different housing alternatives, with one exception: 46 per cent of homeless people staying in emergency shelters are married or live with a partner. Almost all of them are women. Children under 18 comprise 29 per cent of all homeless individuals (whether the homeless person has children over 18 is not registered). Of those who have children under 18, 20 per cent care for them on a daily basis, 5 per cent share care responsibilities, 30 per cent have right of access and 24 per cent have neither care nor right of access. For one in five (21 per cent), the responses are “don’t know” or “other”. “Other” includes access under certain terms and conditions.

Most (77 per cent) of the homeless people were born in Norway. The largest group of non-Norwegian born hail from Africa (8 per cent); the second largest from Asia/Oceania (5 per cent). People born in other European countries are subdivided into groups from “Northern Europe” (2 per cent), “Other EU countries” (2 per cent), and “Rest of Europe including Russia” (2 per cent). The percentage born in a European country is 6, slightly higher than that percentage born in Asia/Oceania. Three per cent have no known country or region of origin. There is an overrepresentation among the homeless of people born outside Norway, compared to

the immigrant population in Norway. 20 per cent of the homeless were born outside Norway, as against 14.5 per cent of the immigrant population in Norway. The proportion of non-Norwegian born homeless persons has been increasing since 2003.

The number of homeless includes people whose home municipality is among those included in the survey. The reported number of homeless persons whose home municipality is not included in the survey is slightly higher than those whose is. One of the groups, those whose home municipality is not included in the sample, comprises non-Norwegian born persons. Many of them are staying in the country on a temporary basis. If we add these people, the number of foreign-born homeless rises slightly. People from “other EU countries” account for a large proportion of this increase (6–8 per cent).

Problems among the homeless

The registration form listed 20 problems commonly or possibly connected with homelessness. We shall briefly present the results for the homeless as a whole (the report includes results for groups of municipalities and subgroups of homeless people). Health status is first. 54 per cent of all homeless people are drug dependent; 38 per cent suffer from a mental illness; 10 per cent have a physical illness/disability; 15 per cent were discharged from an institution six months prior to the reporting period, and as many are awaiting treatment; 14 per cent have an Individual Plan (a means of coordinating health and social services for long-term patients/clients). One in ten is undergoing drug substitution treatment.

One in four (26 per cent) had been thrown out of their living quarters at some time in the past six months. The question on eviction in the questionnaire was followed by questions concerning the reasons for eviction or loss of home (also limited to the last six months). Here are the results: 16 per cent lost their home due to divorce or family conflict; 14 per cent were evicted on grounds of vandalism / disturbance of the peace / disputes; 10 per cent were evicted due to rent or mortgage payments in arrears; 6 per cent had lost their home because they were victims violent or menacing behaviour; and 4 per cent moved out as a result of harassment / discrimination. The boundaries between the various categories are not completely sharp; eviction and different reasons for eviction

tend to converge. One in ten (11 per cent) whose applications for municipal housing had been approved or had been allocated accommodation by the authorities were waiting to move in.

Seventeen per cent of all homeless people are heavily indebted or victims of debt. One of the ten has suffered loss of income in the past six months. A slightly smaller number, 8 per cent, was released from prison in the same space of time. Three per cent are in the country temporarily; 2 per cent are veterans (served in armed forces on missions abroad); and 1 per cent have left the care of the child protection authorities within the last six months.

Some groups of homeless persons

We have studied certain groups of homeless people in greater detail. What follows is a summary of the key findings for each group.

Individuals residing in Norway on a temporary residence permit.

The number of homeless people registered as temporary residents in the country is 307. The number in our opinion is the absolute minimum, and very likely too low. The male/female proportion in this group mirrors the rate for all homeless people: 70 per cent male and 30 per cent female. Certain other attributes vary much more between this group and the homeless as such. The group has even more people between 25 and 44 than the homeless population in general (60 versus 53 per cent). Over half have no known sources of income. One in four has social assistance as their main source of income; 15 per cent receive some form of government benefit; and one in ten have an income from paid work. The largest group, 42 per cent, is from “other EU countries”; the next largest, 22 per cent, from Africa. 45 per cent use the overnight shelters or sleep rough (versus 5 per cent of the general homeless population); 10 per cent live in emergency shelters (as against 3 per cent of all homeless people).

Homeless families with children. Many homeless people have small children, but a small minority are homeless with their children. By homeless family we mean adults who are homeless together with their small children. 357 parents are homeless with a total of 679 children. Of homeless families with children, the male/female composition of the parents reversed: 77 per cent are female; 23 per cent male. This is an even younger group than the

general population of homeless people: 44 per cent are between 25 and 34 years old. Sources of income are basically the same as homeless people's in general. Less than half were born in Norway: 21 per cent were born in Africa; 17 per cent in Asia/Oceania. The most common form of accommodation is staying temporarily with friends, acquaintances and relatives. One in five are in temporary housing. As many as 27 per cent live in emergency shelters, compared to 3 per cent of all homeless people. For half of this group, homelessness is a new, acute problem. There are very few substance addicts in this group. There is a significant overrepresentation of people who lost their homes following a separation from their spouse/ partner or because they were victims of violence or had been threatened.

Veterans. A veteran is anyone who has served in the armed forces and taken part in international missions under the UN or NATO since 1945. Homelessness among veterans was studied for the first time in 2012. The rate of homelessness among veterans is very small indeed; the number is exactly 98. They comprise, however, an extremely vulnerable group. Males are overrepresented (84 per cent). The vast majority are Norwegian born. Nine out of ten are single and 42 per cent are 45 years old or more. We find an overrepresentation of inmates in institutions and prisons, people staying in overnight shelters or sleeping rough. 84 per cent are drug dependent; more than half suffer from some form of mental illness; and more than one in four (27 per cent) have a physical illness / disability. For 73 per cent, homelessness is either a recurring problem stretching over several years or the person has been homeless for longer than six months (long-term homeless).

Young homeless people aged 25 or younger. The number of homeless teenagers and young adults up to the age of 25 accounts for 23 per cent of the general homeless population. The proportion of young homeless people rose until 2008, but did not continue in 2012. The group of municipalities with 10,000–39,999 inhabitants has the highest number of young homeless people. The group of young homeless people differs little from the population as a whole, but we do find a higher proportion staying with friends, acquaintances and relatives as a temporary solution: 54 per cent versus 39 per cent of all homeless people. Half of the youth and young adult group have been homeless for more than six months. 515 people under 20 are classified as homeless. The

youngest under 20 are essentially the same as the whole group of young homeless people (under 25), though we do see certain differences. A smaller proportion of the youngest of the group is drug dependent and a relatively smaller number have a mental illness. Among the youngest, a larger percentage was discharged from the care of the child protection authorities in the last six months compared to the whole group of young people.

Homeless people affected by substance abuse and mental illness problems. One in four homeless people, 1,588 people, are addicted to drugs and have a mental illness. 89 per cent of this group are Norwegian born, compared to 77 per cent of the general homeless population. Relatively fewer stay with friends, acquaintances and relatives compared to the homeless population as such (33 versus 39 per cent), and one in four is an inmate at an institution. 73 per cent have been homeless for more than six months compared to 56 per cent of the whole group of homeless people. 24 per cent were evicted resulting from vandalism / disturbance of the peace / disputes. This is a higher proportion than for the population as a whole, the percentage for which is 14.

Long-term homelessness. 1,990 people, 31 per cent, are long term homeless. For them, homelessness is a recurring problem of several years' duration. This group resembles veterans and older homeless people in the balance of attributes than the population as a whole. There is also a certain convergence between the three groups. Long-term homeless people are slightly older and the proportion of males is higher than in the homeless population in general. A higher proportion have a pension (27 versus 19 per cent of all homeless people). 85 per cent were born in Norway; 9 per cent (5 per cent of the general group of homeless people) sleep rough, have a place in emergency overnight accommodation, while the proportion living temporarily with friends, acquaintances and relatives is lower. As high a percentage as 79 in this group is dependent on drugs. About half of this group has a mental illness.

Older homeless people. The proportion of homeless people over 55 is 6 per cent. This amounts to 408 persons. Normally, people over 55 are not considered "elderly", but given the age composition of the homeless, people over 55 are the oldest. The group has a higher proportion of males. A lower proportion receive social assistance, but a relatively larger number receive a

pension than homeless people in general. People in this group are more likely to stay in temporary accommodation, less often with friends, acquaintances and relatives than the general homeless population. More than half of the group of homeless people over 55 have been homeless for more than six months. On the other hand, we find a lower rate of addiction and mental illness here than in the wider homeless population.

Norwegian State Housing Bank's Action Municipalities. Fifty-two of our 124 sample municipalities are party to the Housing Bank's municipal action scheme. These municipalities are not especially different from the survey municipalities as a whole. The explanation is simple. Action municipalities are among the largest municipalities in the sample, and they are substantial and dominant in the whole municipal sample.

Explanations of homelessness

The present report is an unvarnished presentation of a large amount of data on homeless people in Norway. The analyses of the material whereby we sought to identify explanations and causes of homelessness are presented in NIBR's Report no. 6 of 2013, along with qualitative material covering interviews with homeless people and member of staff of the health and social services.