

R E P R I N T

Youth Homelessness in Denmark?

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YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN DENMARK ?

THE CONTEXT AND THE CONCEPTS

The debate about homelessness and the socially excluded in Denmark often lacks a unified and broadly communicated idea about whom the debate is centred around, both in regard to numerical information and in regard to the measures wished for or provided. Prior to encountering the question of youth homelessness in Denmark, a brief discussion of the concepts used and a short presentation of selected numerical information to outline a context for the problem are therefore necessary.

One definition of homelessness can be taken from P. Brandt who works at the largest institution in Denmark for people who need a temporary place to stay. He writes:

"A person is homeless if he/she does not have a home that can be regarded as stable or permanent and meets one's demands for a reasonable standard of dwelling. He/she is furthermore incapable of using the different relations and institutions offered by society - e.g. family network, and private and public institutions of every kind. The reason for this can be some open or hidden conditions inherent in the person themselves or in the societal organization." (Brandt, 1992; our translation).

How many people fall within this definition in Denmark is not clear, but the most frequently encountered figures show that somewhere around 10,000-13,000 people enter into the realm of homelessness within one year. What we know for sure, however, is that a segment of Danes use the institutions providing temporary shelter established in accordance with the Social Assistance Act.² We do not know how many people use these institutions within one year, but we do know that within one week in January 1996 2,138 people slept in the 2,330 beds that are provided by the 80 institutions esta-

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² § 105. The regional council has to make provisions for the necessary number of places at institutions intended for temporary accommodation for persons who do not possess, or cannot stay in, their own dwelling, and who because of special social difficulties need to be offered a place to dwell or who need active support which cannot be provided through other legislation.

blished in accordance with 6 105 of the Social Assistance Act - whatever that might tell us (Statistics Denmark, 1996B).

We also know that there has been a tendency towards a drop in the average age among the users of these 105-institutions from 1981 to 1993. There has been a significant increase in users under the age of 40 - with the largest relative increase occurring among those below 20 years of age - and a significant decrease in the number above the age of 60. However, since 1993 this tendency towards a lower average age may have stopped - or even been reversed. Nevertheless there is still a continuing influx of people into the 105-institutions.

If we now try to connect the term youth and the term homelessness we will have even more ambiguous knowledge. There is hardly any recent literature on the topic - nor are there any political discussions indicating the existence of a problem. Thus, one important introductory comment enabling us to place youth homelessness in a context is to state that the topic, at present, is not acknowledged as a problem - nor is it considered a potential problem. This is not to say that there is no problem but rather to emphasize the lacking awareness of such a problem.

However, if we go back in time a little we do find youth homelessness to be a problem. In 1985 there arose an awareness of what was termed "street kids", which lasted until the early 90s. Whether the decline in recent attention has been caused by a decline in the phenomenon or by a change in political and research focus is impossible to say with any certainty.

If we return to the period where youth homelessness existed as an accepted problem it is possible to find the following definitions of some of the central concepts:

"homeless youth: young people continually wandering from one address to another (of friends, acquaintances, relatives, strangers), under permanent threat of ending up on the streets - which sometimes happens." (Ploeg, 1990).

If we combine Ploeg's use of the term with part of the definition presented by Juul we have a term that captures youth homelessness as we use it. Juul writes that we are talking about:

"young persons under 18 years of age who for a shorter or longer period spend their lives in special ... environments, such as Christiania ... They include young people who are uprooted and whose primary attachment is to groups in the street environment. Nominally they may have an address with their parents or at an institution, but the crucial difference is that they actually spend little time there and that there are no adults - represented by parents, school, institutions and social welfare authorities - with whom they have a binding relationship." (Juul, 1992).

It is important to distinguish this group from what can be called **street kids**, who are those who actually live on the streets for a longer period. Street kids are very rare in Denmark.

There is little information available about youth homelessness. Actually we hardly know anything! In the estimations of the population presented below the authors go out of their way to make the reader understand that the numbers are only rough - and maybe even false - estimates.

One estimate is provided by Juul & Ertmann who made their analysis on the basis of a comparison between Holland and Denmark. They write:

"If we transfer [the Dutch] numbers to the Danish conditions with differences in population size, and demographic distributions etc. we can estimate that in Denmark there will be approximately 8-9,000 runaways nationally per year. If the rate of those who do not return to the place from which they ran away is the same as is the case in Holland there will on a yearly basis be approximately 6-700 for whom running away is the beginning of a turbulent and roaming period." (Juul & Ertmann, 1991, our translation).

However, not all the 6-700 children can be considered homeless. According to Juul & Ertmann some of these have a social network of such a standard that it keeps the child in school, in a job, etc. Thus, they are not necessarily all excluded, but they are threatened by exclusion. Based on interviews with the relevant institutions, the two authors estimate the number of young homeless in Copenhagen. The estimations by the institutions vary **between 200 and 2,000**, but most lie at **around 300-350 kids**. That is probably the closest we can get towards figuring out the size of the population.

THE ROLE AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE WELFARE SYSTEM

As is often the case when presenting measures directed towards a group in Denmark, the role of the welfare state is the most important to outline. The state is the most important actor and is the institution that will be in focus below.

An outline of the legal aspects regarding financial social protection for youngsters

The institutions provided by the state are supposed to include those which are not included in the 'basic' institutions taken for granted by the vast majority - institutions providing most of us with the meaningfulness of our life - e.g. the family, a job, a social network.

Of major importance in understanding the role of the public authorities - and their possibilities - are legal rights and duties. These legal aspects provide the preventive context in which youth homelessness, or the process

towards youth homelessness, needs to be seen - and these legal measures might be where an understanding of the eventual decline in the problem is to be found. The most important is the Social Assistance Act. It states:

"§ 6. Every man and woman is obliged to take care of him/her self, his/her spouse and children below the age of 18....

Stk. 3. The obligation to take care of a child ceases,

- 1) if the child itself is obliged to take care of a spouse or child,
- 2) if a daughter needs help in connection with pregnancy."

What this means is that the primary responsibility for taking care of children rests with the parents. It is up to the parents to try to provide the necessary support if the child does not establish a family themselves or - more trickily formulated - if a daughter is not helped in regard to a pregnancy. There are, however, some points which need clarification: Does this mean that a child cannot receive financial help from the public? What does it mean to be helped with a pregnancy? etc. Some of the questions can be clarified by the presentation of concrete cases.

One case illustrates that in the Social Assistance Act **no minimum age limit** for the bestowal of financial support exists. In one case, *Ankestyrelsen*³ discussed whether a municipality could provide financial support to two children in foster care through the Social Assistance Act, so that a specific foster-father who was known to the children but did not have the necessary financial resources for taking care of the children could do so anyway. *Ankestyrelsen* ruled that the Social Assistance Act had no minimum age limit for obtaining cash social assistance in accordance with § 37⁴, and the children could be provided with a monthly income. Thus § 37 provides the possibility for the municipality to support the foster-father's household in caring for the children when they are below the age of 18 - but more importantly for this report: § 37 can be used to provide financial support to those who need it - including children below the age of 18.

Another question arising from the Social Assistance Act is **when the municipality is supposed to help** youngsters financially versus when the authorities can claim that it is the responsibility of the parents. We have found a couple of cases aiding the construction of this demarcation.

The first case illustrates a situation where the municipality is considered in its right not to support a person under the age of 18 financially. This case

³ The institution that deals with possible complaints over the administration by municipalities and that interprets and answers questions by the municipalities regarding the Social Assistance Act.

⁴ § 37 is the paragraph that outlines the general criteria for financial help in the Social Assistance Act. In general, those who have experienced changes in their current situation because of a social incidence; who are staying legally in Denmark; who - if possible - are available on the labour market; and who cannot provide for themselves, are entitled to financial help in accordance to § 37.

concerns a young girl, 17 years of age who, because of conflicts with her parents, moves in with her boyfriend's parents. She keeps in contact with her own parents, her father states that he will help her financially and that she will always be welcome to move back. She asks the municipality for financial aid to obtain a flat of her own and to cover the necessary costs of living. Her request is turned down. The case was appealed to *Ankestyrelsen*. Here it was confirmed that she is not entitled to publicly funded financial help since, a) it is not considered a serious enough break between a youngster and their parents just to move out of the parents household, and b) the obligation of financial support still rests with the parents, especially since they are still in touch and because the parents have stated that they are willing to support their child. Here the public authority sets a limit in regard to which causes are considered relevant for obtaining help. The child cannot choose to become dependent on the public authorities rather than the parents if the reason can be considered as ordinary problems between generations. Furthermore the case shows that the public will leave the 'burden' of caring in the hands of the parents when possible. We also get an indication that a break between a child and a parent is not considered severe enough if contact is sustained after the child has moved out.

The second case illustrates the opposite point. In this case the municipality is obliged to financially support a boy aged 17 with cash social assistance. Here the boy has been living on his own and has through his own employment supported himself for more than a year. As a result of unemployment he applies for financial aid. His application is turned down by the municipality who claim that his father carries the obligation to support him. This was overruled by *Ankestyrelsen* which states that the boy has the right to assistance under § 37 since he has been living on his own for a considerable time, but also finds that the parents should pay an amount in support - the exact amount is to be calculated in accordance with their capabilities.

Here the public authorities takes on part of the responsibility for financial aid, but only part since the child is below the age of 18, and his parents are supposed to support him as well as they can. The municipality provides the additional resources needed for the boy to continue his current life.

The last question which we will try to clarify arises from § 6. Stk. 3 described above: When does a child have an obligation towards a spouse or a child? And when is a daughter helped with a pregnancy? In regard to the first question the line of demarcation is the entrance into marriage, thus a formal and rather clear line. In regard to the second question there are two cases which fairly clearly indicate that a pregnant daughter has the right to obtain financial help from the public authorities from the moment she informs them that she is pregnant and that she cannot support herself through work. In one case the municipality was overruled in their decision to make the parents carry the financial responsibility until the 7th month of the pregnancy when the municipality would then take over.

In a second case the *Ankestyrelsen* ruled that the municipality, by listening and explaining their rules to the pregnant mother, had been helping with the pregnancy, and thus the parents were from that point on no longer responsible for the child's support - the responsibility had passed to the municipality.

The § 6 and the cases related to it have served to outline the legal obligation of the public system in regard to helping youngsters who apply for financial help. What has been clarified is that the welfare state does provide the possibility of obtaining financial support for children under the age of 18 - when certain conditions are fulfilled.

Financial support and homeless youngsters

If we now turn to an eventual young homeless population and focus on their probability of obtaining financial support, we can present the following picture. It is not based on broad interviewing or surveys, but on a few lines in a report based on interviews with a few of the young people who, in 1990, came under our definition of a homeless child.

From the statements provided through interviews done by Juul & Ertmann (1991) we get the picture that some of **the children receive a monthly cheque** from the welfare office. It is, however, also a general finding that most of the youngsters interviewed have experience of criminal activities and that the explicated reason for this is often need.

We have no knowledge of the financial situation of these children, but a qualified guess as to the reason for the discrepancy between the intention in the Social Assistance Act to provide the help needed and the situation where the children are forced into criminal activity, can be that the administration discovers the severity of the youngster's condition too late, and consequently he or she may be forced into criminal activities prior to obtaining financial assistance. Yet there could be other reasons that we do not know about - we should not forget that some of these children might have a need not matching the calculated average need of persons of their age, for instance if they are using different types of narcotics or other substances.

The possibility of rent support

A measure that might be of importance in preventing homelessness is the possibility of supporting the payment of rent. For youngsters especially, rent subsidy deserves attention here. To be entitled to rent subsidy one must live in a rented dwelling complete with a private kitchen and drain system. This excludes support for rent payment in rented rooms, dormitories, etc. The important variables when deciding the amount that one can receive in support - if any - are the income of the household and the amount paid in rent. In the bill regulating rent subsidy there is no mentio-

ning of a minimum age for receiving support - thus a first conclusion might be that **people under the age of 18 can be supported**. However, this conclusion could be undermined by § 6 of the Social Assistance Act (described above): Does the holder of custody have financial responsibility for the child's eventual rent payment? The Ministry of Housing has tried to clarify this potential conflict - there is no minimum age limit for receiving rent subsidy, but when the income of the household is calculated an eventual (regular) financial support by parents to the child is included. Thus, there is a connection between the calculation of the household's income and the youngster in the household's relation to his/her parents. We have been told by the Municipality of Copenhagen that they have no practice based on concrete decisions because they have not had a case where it has been a problem.

Measures not primarily dealing with financing

The public authorities do possess measures besides those directed towards the financial side of the problem. This is the topic towards which we now turn our attention.

To understand these measures we must consider the protection of the family against state interventions. This 'respect' for the privacy of the family influences the possibility of the welfare offices intervening, as the family is attributed a major role in determining, verifying, confirming, and thus limiting the room for action. According to the Social Assistance Act §33, the municipality can make decisions about the measures, according to stk. 2, when it is considered of substantial significance for the child's or the youngster's special needs for caring. **"It should be the aim that the child or the youngster can stay in the home. The decision is to be made with the consent of the holder of custody."** This role of the parents is identifiable in most relevant legislation, and it is standard practice that one first tries out all the possibilities of solving the problems in cooperation with the family. This, however, seems to be a basic problem in regard to the homeless youngsters. One of those employed at the 24H Help Service (see below) formulated this problem in an interview with Juul & Ertmann: "The whole area regulated by the Social Assistance Act is thoroughly undermined by **the duty to work for the parents rather than for the child**. This can be seen in the debate about the enforced removal of children." (Juul & Ertmann, 1991, *our translation and highlighting*). The problem is underlined by the attitude that keeping the family involved in the problem-solving for as long as possible should be the goal of any intervention - or at least a re-involvement of the family as soon as possible, has the separation already occurred. Again the existence of such an attitude is said to exist by some of those working in the municipality interviewed by Juul & Ertmann:

"The attitude among many in the system, and many parents is: 'all that needs to be done is to return them to their parents, because that's where they belong, and they are the problems of the parents.' It takes guts and

strength by the social worker to engage in these cases. It somewhat demands that one goes against the current in the system." (Juul & Ertmann, 1991, our translation).

The description below of the concrete measures available to the welfare office must be seen in this context.

The range of measures in the Social Assistance Act

Some important concrete measures upon which the social worker can draw are set up in the Social Assistance Act. The paragraph of importance here is § 33. Stk. 2. This paragraph reads:

"§ 33. Stk. 2. The municipality can decide:

- 1) to offer consultative service with consideration to the child or youngster and can decide that the child or the youngster must seek a 'day-time service', a youth club, a place of education or equivalent.
- 2) to provide practical pedagogical or other support in the home.
- 3) to provide supportive family treatment or equivalent.
- 4) to establish places for 24 hour stays for both those with custody for the child or youngster, for the child or the youngster him/her self, or for other members of the family.
- 5) to establish relief possibilities.
- 6) to appoint a personal counsellor for the child or the youngster.
- 7) to provide financial support for the expenses connected with the provisions 1) through 5) when the one with custody of the child or youngster does not have the needed means.
- 8) to provide financial support for expenses with the effect that accommodation outside of the home can be avoided, that a return to the home from other accommodation can be hastened, or if the support can contribute to a significant degree to a stable contact between the parents and the child/children accommodated outside of the home.
- 9) to provide financial support for enrolment at a boarding or continuation school when those with child custody do not possess the necessary means themselves.
- 10) to put the child or the youngster into accommodation outside the home, in a 24 hour institution, in a foster family, or in another approved place of accommodation that can be conceived as beneficial for the child's or the youngster's special needs."

These measures are not to be conceived as separate measures where the use of one excludes the use of another. They can be combined as seen fit. Furthermore they should not be seen in a hierarchy where the welfare office first has to initiate number 1) prior to initiating number 2). There is a clause in regard to public administration in Denmark, that the measures initiated should be the measures that have the least intervening effects, but this does not close the room for action. The clause should be understood

as establishing an obligation on behalf of the administration to choose the least intervening measure of the measures considered sufficiently intervening.

We will now present the measures made available through § 33 in a little more depth.

Consultative service can be provided by the municipality if there are indications that the child might be in need of counselling. This need can stem from troubles between the parents or between parental guardians, from the behavioral or psychological troubles of the child, e.g. exposed through violence or criminal activities. The consultation can lead to a recommendation of the child's enrolment in a day care centre, sports club, or the like. The recommendation can turn into an enforceable measure if the suggested activity is considered to be of vital importance for the child's well-being and if the holder of custody is not willing to follow the recommendation.

Pedagogical support is an 'in home' support that is provided by the municipality. The support can be the provision of help to structure the daily life of the family - helping with the timing of sending children to school, sports, and the like; helping the family in its contact with the surrounding society etc. The support can take on the character of both a pedagogical as well as a practical nature. The support is supposed to equal the needs of the family and its intensity can thus vary from once every second week to a couple of hours daily. The duration of the support can be for a brief period to several years.

Family treatment is intended to provide services and activities enabling the family to stay together. The activities can take on many forms but consist mostly of the supervised conducting of daily activities or playing in combination with consultations.

A 24 hour stay for a family is a measure that provides the municipality with the possibility of sending a whole family or part thereof on an 'away from home' stay. In the legislation there is no explicated limitation as to where such a 24 hour stay can take place, the important element being that it is considered a significant step in solving some or one of the problems that the family is seen as having. The 24 hour stay will often occur as an integrated element of family treatment.

Relief possibilities are measures with the aim of smoothing out the feeling that caring for a child is a burden. It consists of various possible accommodations away from home for the child and can vary in length and frequency. It can last for one or two days, for weeks, or for vacation periods. The accommodation provisions can take place many times and can be events that take place over many years. As is the case with the provision of

possibilities for 24 hour stays for families, the law does not limit the possibilities for accommodation for the child as long as the municipality judges the accommodation to be secure.

Personal counselling enables the municipality to provide the child or youngster with a personal counsellor. This can be provided without the consent of the child, but, as explicated in vejledning, 15.12.92, if the child is directly opposed to such an initiative the possibility of success is almost nil.

Financial support can be provided by the municipality. The financial support in accordance with 7) and 9) is provided on the basis of an evaluation of needs whereas 8) is for those who qualify independent of their income. What is important for qualifying for financial aid in accordance with 8) is that the means are considered as clearly lowering the risk of a potential situation of forced accommodation. The financial means in accordance with 8) can be given to various initiatives - it can be financial help for the renewal of a dwelling, financial help for the moving of a family, or financial help towards the acquiring of minor items for the household. The financial support for 7) covers eventual expenses stemming from the initiatives and possibilities provided by the provisions 1)-5) described above. It can, for example, be the expenses caused by lost income because of the devotion of time to the measures. Finally, the financial support that can be provided in accordance with 9) can cover the expenses for the enrolment of a child in a boarding or continuation school if this is considered as helping to avoid of forced accommodation.

Accommodation outside the home. The last of the measures outlined in § 33 is also the most radical form of intervention. It deals with the possibility of accommodation in foster homes, institutions, or similar (see below). This measure can - if it is seen as necessary for the well-being of the child - include forced accommodation, but in that case § 35 of the Social Assistance Act becomes important. In § 35 of the Social Assistance Act the conditions under which forced accommodation is a possibility are specified. The paragraph reads:

- "§ 35. When 1) insufficient caring for or treatment of a child or youngster, 2) violence or other serious encroachments, 3) substance abuse, criminal activities, or other serious social troubles of the child or youngster, 4) other behavioural or adaptive problems of the child or youngster are considered to be evident risks that the child's or youngster's health or development is seriously damaged, the [public authority] can, without consent of the custody holder and/or the youngster above 15 years of age, decide that the child or youngster shall be accommodated outside the home... This decision can only be taken if it is substantiated that the problems cannot be solved under the child's or youngster's continued stay in the home."

It is explicitly stated that if a child aged 15 agrees to the placement outside of home, while the parents disagree, the municipality can nevertheless make this decision, if it is considered of significant importance because of the special needs of the child and because the problems in question cannot be solved if the child stays at home. Unfortunately we have no data about the municipal practice.

In *vejledning, 15.12.92* the different types of **institutions provided by the state with regard to the accommodation** of children and youngsters outside the home are listed, and it is underlined that the range of the types of measures is important. It is the obligation of the regional counties to make certain that there exist the necessary places for accommodation of the children outside the home. The county can provide the necessary institutions in cooperation with the municipality, with other regional counties, and/or with voluntary organizations. The accommodations range from foster homes, dormitories or like places where the youngster lives in a flat of his/her own, to larger institutions with staff and different services or treatments. There are also alternatives to these traditional services e.g. 'ship projects' or the enrolment in various schools with different kinds of pedagogical approaches.

There is only a relatively small share of youngsters and children **accommodated outside the home without the consent** of the custody holder. According to the statistical information gathered annually by Statistics Denmark (1996A+C), it seems to be less than 1 in 10 accommodations. However, it might not be that easy to make such a conclusion. There will be a tendency towards the registration of more voluntary agreements because this makes the whole process easier for both the custody holder and the public authority, and it makes the process of later re-accommodation back into the family an easier process as well, which is in accordance with the idea of faith in the family as outlined above. Thus, some of the voluntary agreements might be voluntary in regard to the paragraph used, but should the custody holder not be willing to cooperate,⁶ the public authority will engage in the process of forced accommodation.

In regard to the question of accommodation, Christoffersen - who has evaluated the life course of previously accommodated children - states that about half the children who were registered as having been accommodated outside the home did not remember this. He writes:

"A significant share of the accommodations had presumably taken place without the youngster him/herself being aware of it, or without their knowledge that she/he in a juridical understanding had been placed in accommodation outside the home. Thus, around half of those who do not remember that they have been placed outside the home said that they had been at a boarding or continuation school, in family custody with relatives, or that they had received support for their own room. But they denied that it had been a question of placement into accommodation outside the home." (Christoffersen, 1993, our translation).

From Christoffersen we can also get an idea of the number of **children that contact the social authorities** themselves, hoping to be accommodated outside their home. According to Christoffersen, this applies to about 1/3 of those youngsters who remember that they have been accommodated outside the home (1993).

So far we have dealt with the possibilities provided by the Social Assistance Act with regard to troubled families, and the most drastic measure that we have dealt with has been forced accommodation. That we have devoted this much space to measures which cannot necessarily be said to reflect the number of homeless youngsters might seem confusing, but our point is that if we are to understand why youth homelessness, as mentioned previously, is not considered a serious problem we need to understand the framework of prevention which is part of the welfare state - we need to know how the welfare state might intervene in the process which might otherwise lead to youth homelessness. Furthermore, according to Juul & Ertmann, "no less than 30 out of 36 of the interviewed [young homeless] have been accommodated outside their [biological family's] home, and in most cases more than once". (1991, *our translation*). Therefore youngsters accommodated outside their family's home are probably an important group to be considered in an understanding of at least one characterization of the homeless youth.

A COUPLE OF TARGETED MEASURES

For those who are not covered by the general measures provided by the Social Assistance Act, there are still some targeted institutions that could provide help. There are three initiatives to be briefly outline here - the DASK pool scheme; the 24H Help Service; and *Tjek-punkt*.

The DASK pool scheme

A recent initiative taken by the Ministry of Social Affairs is DASK. It is an abbreviation which can be translated as "Drop the powerlessness - create the contact with socially troubled youngsters"⁵. The overall aim of the different projects established under the pool scheme is to be able (better) to **understand and provide new measures in social work** which will include those youngsters not covered by the existing methods. Currently there is no evaluation of the existing projects, so our presentation will have to rely on information about the aim of the pool scheme, and some of the projects' descriptions of their own role. The target group for the initiatives is people between 14 and 20 years of age who have lost faith in the possibility of any future improvements as well as the possibility of successes in generally accepted parameters like education, work, family etc. One of the basic

⁵ The Danish name is "Drop afmagten - skab kontakten til unge med store sociale vanskeligheder".

hopes of the projects under the pool scheme is that they will be able to establish contact with the youngster, and then be able to retain that contact. This is considered one of the most important aspects, in order to provide possibilities over time - and then to make sure that the child does not experience yet another defeat. To give an idea of the different projects, we will briefly present two concrete initiatives - "The Wild Youngsters"⁶ and "Hill of Practising"⁷ (*our translation*).

"The Wild Youngsters" tries to establish lasting contact between the youngsters and the project through various measures. One target group is youngsters between 14-16 years of age involved in the rising gang cultures in Copenhagen. By drawing upon people from the local environment a couple of years older, who have previously been active in the criminal environment, they try to reach the youngsters. A second initiative involves establishing contact between the Hip-Hop environment and some of the troubled youngsters. A third measure is directed towards the problem of children dropping out of the school system. By creating a different temporary 'school', those in charge of the project hope that they can provide the necessary basis for the 'drop-outs' to return at a later stage without having lost too much ground. These are only some of the initiatives in the project.

The second project, "Hill of Practicing", is more integrated in the sense that it includes different important aspects in the lives of a few youngsters. The project is established around a foster family which is special in that it has a large house - actually consisting of one central house with an annex where there are two independent flats - and the family owns a small factory (with 12 employes). The idea is that the family takes on foster children who start living with the family in the central house. When they can manage for themselves they can move into their own flat located right next door - thus having both a feeling of independence and at the same time not being alone. Parallel to providing a flexible structure for housing the family provides job opportunities at the factory in conditions equal to the normal labour market - but again without the potential isolation and with the possibility of a helping hand with regard to practical matters should it be needed.

These two projects illustrate how the pool scheme is used to develop new measures directed towards socially troubled children, but it is presently too early for a more in-depth evaluation.

The 24H Help Service

The second initiative we wish to present is the 24H Help Service. It is an institution established by the public authorities. It deals with the most burdened children in Copenhagen. The 24H Help Service consists of an office

⁶ The Danish name is "De Vilde Unge".

⁷ The Danish name is "Øvebakken".

open - as the name indicates - 24 hours a day. Furthermore they have 9 places for temporary accommodation in emergencies. The 24H Help Service's work basically consists of two types of encounters with burdened youngsters - the telephone advice and face-to-face encounters.

When asked to describe their users an employee of the 24H Help Service stated that they are mostly between 15 and 17 years of age, but some are as young as 13 and some as old as 18. The age of the users has not changed for the last couple of years. About 2/3 of their encounters are with girls - which at first may come as a surprise. This is explained by the measures used at the 24H Help Service - it primarily provides conversation, which might attract girls rather than boys. They also point out that it might be because girls find it easier to encounter institutions than boys. A final explanation given is the visibility of boys earlier on in the exclusion process - boys are more visible and therefore picked up by the system at a younger age. The 24H Help Service does state, however, that their more frequent encounters with girls rather than boys is not an indication of the gender distribution among young homeless people. The person interviewed thinks that more of their users have mental problems and that heavy-burdened youngsters are becoming more frequent. This is the only, but important, indication of an increasing problem that might be connected with youth homelessness.

Presented briefly, the services offered by the 24H Help Service - in the cases where more than 'just' a telephone conversation or a personal conversation is needed - is to enrol the youngster in one of their 9 places of temporary accommodation while they, together with the public authority, try to figure out what to do. One possibility is to try to find accommodation for the youngster in accordance with the possibilities presented above.

The 24H Help Service points out that the youngsters' problems are primarily social in character, but as the age of those who want to move away from their parents is declining, it is also becoming a problem stemming from the housing market. Unfortunately we have not been able to trace any data confirming such a decline in age - we have not been able to find data on the issue at all.

Tjek-Punkt

A third initiative which we will present directs its attention towards the most burdened group of youngsters. The project is called *Tjek-Punkt*. *Tjek-Punkt* is located in one of the most socially burdened areas of Copenhagen - an area called *Vesterbro*. The project has a yearly budget of 2.6 million Danish crowns (approximately 350,000 ECU). It primarily consists of a two-room flat with a small kitchen and a small toilet. In addition to the flat - which contains a living room and an office - the project has two apartments that can be used for accommodation when the need is acute (Nissen, 1996A).

A researcher who has analyzed *Tjek-Punkt* - M. Nissen - states that the central aspect for understanding the project is to acknowledge its double role: firstly as a part of the Municipality of Copenhagen's strategy towards the socially excluded which connects *Tjek-Punkt* to the public authorities, and secondly as an independently anchored project that tries to influence and change the practices of the administration's treatment of socially excluded youngsters. The project is financed by, and works together with, the social offices in Copenhagen, but at the same time the project's staff sometimes confront these offices with what they find to be problematic practices in regard to specific cases. *Tjek-Punkt* therefore has to do a balancing act between being seen as one of the public institutions by the youngsters who use *Tjek-Punkt*, and being seen as an irrelevant, superfluous, and contrary project by the public authorities. This balance can be hard, and sometimes it fails. Nissen writes that "it is a question of how long the 'system-critical image' revealed to the youngsters can last if they do not succeed in influencing the social system's treatment of concrete cases" (Nissen, 1996A, *our translation*).

The staff employed at *Tjek-Punkt* consist of 7 full-time positions. They do not use much voluntary help, and the few who are used often have a professional link with working with the socially excluded, either through another main occupation or because of their education. The few volunteers are treated as if they were working professionally in the project - though without payment (Nissen, 1996B).

The target group of *Tjek-Punkt* is - as mentioned above - **the most burdened youngsters**, or as expressed by Nissen, "*Tjek-Punkt* primarily orients itself towards youngsters whose exclusion process has been completed" (1994, *our translation*). Most of the users come, at least partly, under our definition of homelessness presented previously, and a significant number of the users are substance abusers and/or prostitutes.

What the project is used for varies. The staff are used by some to get a relaxing talk once in a while. Sometimes the youngsters drop by for satisfying the worst hunger or getting the necessities of life which they need straightaway, e.g. contraceptives or tobacco. Thus, *Tjek-Punkt* serves as a Drop-inn, where it attempts to provide a safe haven from the very rough environment which the youngsters live in. In this regard it should be noted that *Tjek-Punkt* does not want to be 'just' a Drop-inn. It is important for the project that they are able to establish some kind of lasting contact with the young people (Nissen, 1996A). The staff also function as mediators between the youngsters when they are having problems. That can include problems with each other, with their boy/girlfriend, or even problems with the public authorities. The staff also help the youngsters with the practical aspects of their life, such as getting up in the morning or keeping an agreement with the welfare office.

One of the methods used by *Tjek-Punkt* is outreaching work. The staff are divided into teams who walk around socially burdened areas trying to establish contact with youngsters that they find on the streets. One conclusion in regard to the outreaching work which we find important to communicate is the necessity of measures and services that those who do the outreaching work can draw upon after contact has been initiated. **It is necessary to be able to back up the talk with some concrete projects differing from the projects the youngsters have previously been unable to use**, otherwise the established contact is going to be lost again. This is one of the important findings which Nissen presents.

"If one cannot in reality offer different help other than that which the youngster has not been able to use previously, then the lacking credibility of the help offered will slowly make the outreaching work meaningless." (Nissen, 1996A, *our translation*).

It is worth noting that there are very few rules in *Tjek-Punkt*. Instead *Tjek-Punkt* functions much on the cooperation of the youngsters. That means *Tjek-Punkt* can be a project apt to include those who otherwise have considerable difficulties in living up to the rules of institutions - and therefore often end up being thrown out of different projects (Nissen, 1996A). This can also be seen in the content of the project, which is determined by the youngsters who use *Tjek-Punkt* rather than laid down prior to an encounter with a concrete user: "*Tjek-Punkt* is what the youngsters use it for" as Nissen writes (1996A, *our translation*), and he continues: "The pedagogy is mainly reactive, but not therefore passive or indifferent."

One of the important elements in the encounter with the youngster is to make it a dialogue rather than recommendations (or orders) of the established system. The approach is to work in "the environment that can be established around the youngsters in their life as substance abusers, criminals and prostitutes." (Nissen 1996A, *our translation*).

What the project attempts is basically **to provide those who are living in such high insecurity with a feeling of safety**, while at the same time accepting the knowledge that they cannot pull the youngsters out of their surroundings and place them in institutions and then expect them to behave in accordance with the norms of general society - at least not without a considerable amount of time and help.

One important finding so far has been that there is a **demand for patience**. A frequent problem is that many of the attempts to provide measures for the youngsters end up with the youngster leaving - either because of a feeling of rigid limits in the project or because they are thrown out. *Tjek-Punkt* then needs to be able to start building up something positive again. Two problems which Nissen sees in the approach that the youngsters and the public institutions take towards each other - and which *Tjek-Punkt* needs to be able to handle - are that:

"the possibilities for treatment in which Tjek-Punkt can enrol the youngsters have a somewhat ambivalent status among the kids because they on the one hand show a road out of the life on the streets, but on the other hand put forth some demands that the youngsters find it hard to satisfy... The youngsters in Tjek-Punkt are exactly those who the institutions look upon with the greatest ambivalence because they on the one hand have a strong need for help, but on the other hand have demands very difficult to satisfy." (Nissen. 1996A, our translation).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The first point that we would like to stress is that the present socio-political debate does not include a great deal about youth homelessness. Rather the debate is centred around problems relating to violence and gangs, especially among young immigrants.

However, the fact that we have not been able to identify youth homelessness as a widespread problem is not a guarantee that the problem does not exist. The only thing we can be certain of is that it is not presently considered as important. However, with great caution, one could take the lacking awareness of youth homelessness as a problem to be an illustration that the preventive system is functioning to a significant degree. We pointed out above how there are some measures directed at intervention in the processes which could lead to the social exclusion of youngsters - the possibility of financial help if needed, the possibility of accommodation outside of home or the like - maybe these interventions have had some effect. It is probably important to stress the width in the measures provided, from consultation to accommodation, and the width in the types of accommodations as well.

To underline the role of the preventive aspects of the welfare state is not equivalent to saying that there are no youngsters with troubles. We have found institutions that are dealing with both threatened as well as excluded children, and there is one institution - the 24H Help Service - that points out that we are experiencing a development towards more heavily burdened children. Some children run away from their home or the institutions into which they have been placed - and some of these may live for a while on the streets. There are also people who are using the different targeted measures presented above - so there are some who can use the help provided. However, the measures presently considered to be of importance are directed towards a target group other than homeless youngsters - e.g. street gangs with a special focus on second generation immigrants. What seems to be the most important indication, however, is that the system needs to have a range of provided measures, and it needs to be flexible in its dealings with marginalized (including homeless) youngsters - flexible both

with regard to the degree of regulation of behaviour as well as to the demands that the system places on the users of the provided measures.

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