YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN SCANDINAVIA

By Adrienne DiTommaso
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As long as there have been permanent, settled communities, there has been homelessness. Though there are worthy and effective grassroots programs as well as government initiatives to reduce adult homelessness across Europe, a survey of the existing literature suggests a paucity of accessible studies concerning youth homelessness. This article aims to briefly summarize some of the issues of youth homelessness in one European region, Scandinavia, and to present the relevant research and possible solutions to the problem of homeless youth.

While the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland are known for their social services and welfare programs, youth homelessness remains a real problem in these nations. Surprisingly, statistics regarding homeless youth are difficult to come by in some of these nations due to their methods for classifying young people. In Sweden, youth are not considered independent from their parents and therefore are not counted as individuals but as members of a family. The existing statistics claiming that the homeless population in Sweden was around 17,800 in 2005 thus only counts adults and not children or teens, meaning the actual number of homeless could be much higher, the proportion of which are youth being unknown. Social scientists in Denmark, as early as 1995, commented on similar misleading ways of measuring homeless youth populations. In a report to the European Federation of Organizations Working With the Homeless (FEANTSA), Tobias Børner Stax summarizes another issue: “There is hardly any recent literature on the topic—nor are there any political discussions indicating an existence of a problem...the topic, at present, is not acknowledged as a problem, nor is it considered a potential problem.”

Researchers in Sweden and Denmark both recommend that comprehensive national surveys be undertaken to measure the true extent of youth homelessness.

Characteristics of youth who become homeless fall into the typical categories of runaways, “unruly” offspring thrown out of their homes by their parents, and children of homeless adults. Interestingly, as the Scandinavian nations incorporate immigrants from new EU member states, as well as a growing number of refugees from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an increasing number of homeless youth accompany these immigrant populations. Illegal migrants also represent a large portion of homeless youth in Scandinavia. It has been a challenge for legislators to develop policies for utilizing the social welfare system to aid these populations, to integrate them into mainstream Scandinavian culture, and to keep them off the streets.

Legislation of the past five years has sought to prevent these homeless immigrant youth from resorting to gang violence and involvement with drugs. These policies have mainly focused on allocating a percentage of low-income housing to homeless families and funding grassroots programs that use the ‘Housing First’ approach, which advocates increasing social welfare by establishing independent tenancy.

In a study surveying homelessness across Europe, Benjaminsen and Dyb explain that in Denmark, “municipalities have to refer 25% of public housing that becomes vacant to socially vulnerable groups [and] social support has also to be made available.” This has been a smart first step in addressing youth homelessness, though it has created “socially vulnerable” communities which suffer from poverty and social isolation. Research also points to the need for the cooperation of governments with educational systems to provide long term chances of escaping poverty and homelessness. A 2007 longitudinal study of at-risk Finnish adolescents revealed that programs supporting “partnerships” and institutionalized educational care helped to stabilize the youths’ life situations into the participants’ early 20’s. The need for cooperation between various
social welfare agencies and actors inside and outside of the government clearly makes the issue of combating youth homelessness a complicated problem that will take patience to solve.

Though Scandinavia by no means has an overwhelming problem with youth homelessness, the above information shows that it is a real and potential social justice issue across the region. Much more research must be done to identify the size, demographics, and characteristics of homeless youth populations, with special emphasis paid to the growing numbers of immigrant and illegal migrant youth. Hopefully in the near future, this research can be utilized by Scandinavian legislators, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations to create effective and efficient solutions to youth homelessness.

REFERENCES CITED


Sidebar:

The following organizations and NGOs work with local and national governments and private citizens to combat youth homelessness across the European continent.

European Federation of National Organizations working with the Homeless. Contains a comprehensive listing of national organizations fighting homelessness, especially among children and teens.


The following print resources give more insight into homelessness in Europe, with some important sections on youth homelessness:
