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How Denmark's 'ghetto list' is ripping apart migrant communities

Copenhagen and other cities are planning mass housing evictions in a 'social experiment' to encourage integration

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From the outside, Copenhagen's Mjølnerparken housing estate is pretty unremarkable. Located just beyond the Danish capital's hip Victorian tenement belt, this sturdy-looking complex of squat red-brick 1980s blocks surrounded by lawns seems quintessentially Scandinavian - green, tidy and even a little prim.

The estate is nonetheless at the heart of a storm, shaken by a drastic set of policies that Danish media have called "the biggest social experiment of this century". Mjølnerparken has, along with 28 other low-income neighbourhoods nationwide, been classified by the Danish government as a "ghetto".

Denmark has compiled this "ghetto list" annually since 2010; the criteria are higher than average jobless and crime rates, lower than average educational attainment and, controversially, more than half of the population being first or second-generation migrants. The government essentially sees these neighbourhoods as irremediable urban disasters, and in May 2018 it proposed dealing with them by mass eviction and reconstruction. The homes of up to 11,000 social housing tenants could be on the chopping block.

Understandably, many residents are reeling. “This is a beautiful place to live,” says Asif Mehmood, 52, a Pakistani-born taxi driver who has lived on the Mjølnerparken estate for 26 years. His building has been selected to be cleared, renovated and turned into private rental.

“Of course there have been problems here - but if a fire in a building is traced to a single gas leak, surely the best idea is to fix the leak. It’s not to clear out the entire building and start again. That’s what is happening here, though. Instead of solving a limited problem, they want to clear the whole block.”

In addition, the law itself applies differently in these neighbourhoods. The first stage of the government’s so-called ghetto deal set higher penalties for crimes, and allowed for collective punishment - by eviction - of entire families if one of their members commits a criminal act.

Other laws seem designed to force the integration in Danish society of immigrant communities. Pre-school children must spend at least 25 hours a week in state kindergartens with a maximum migrant intake of 30%, and face language tests. Otherwise their families’ benefits can be revoked.

But the most stringent part of the plan came into force on 1 January 2020, when these areas must slash their public housing stock to no more than 40%. To achieve this within 10 years, entire blocks will be emptied and converted into private and co-operative housing, from which people on low incomes will be barred. In some cities (though not Copenhagen) the blocks will simply be demolished.

Current tenants will be offered alternative accommodation, but no control over its location, quality or cost. Those who refuse can now simply be evicted. Adding insult to injury, the eviction and renovation plans will be paid for from proceeds from a fund paid into by public housing tenants themselves.

The plan has faced international censure. Last year the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a tweet that the package was “hugely troubling & risks heightening racial discrimination against people of migrant origin - further ‘ghettoising’ them. Coercive assimilation measures run risk of fuelling racial prejudice, xenophobia & intolerance.”



Women in Superkilen, a recently designed urban renewal park near Mjølnerparken. Photograph: Andrew Kelly/Reuters

Few people dispute that the neighbourhoods on the list have problems. Mjølnerparken scores highly in each of the four criteria. It has a high proportion of low-income residents and benefit claimants, and low levels of educational attainment (although this is calculated using a controversial metric that excludes qualifications gained outside Denmark or possessed by people under 30). Its proportion of residents with criminal records is 2.7%, the exact minimum threshold for “ghetto” status.

The final metric, however, is seen by many critics as crucial evidence of the law's real intent: more than 50% of Mjølnerparken's residents are non-Danish born or born in Denmark to non-Danish parents (categories between which the guidelines do not differentiate). A neighbourhood with similar problems but occupied by third-generation Danes, most of whom are white, would not qualify as a "ghetto".

Denmark has swung sharply rightwards in recent years. Inhabitants of areas like Mjølnerparken, particularly Muslim residents, have been repeated targets of media and political panic over "Islamisation". Some rural municipalities with minuscule Muslim populations have made pork compulsory for school canteens, while the far-right Danish People's party, part of the country's ruling coalition until June 2019, sought to corral any refugees denied resident permits and who are deemed to be criminals on to a remote island. The immigration minister suggested Muslims should take leave from work during Ramadan "to avoid negative consequences for the rest of Danish society", and racially or religiously motivated hate crimes have become more frequent.

The country's new centre-left coalition, elected in June 2019, has not been much different, continuing to pursue anti-immigrant policies supposedly to reduce far-right support. The new Social Democrat housing minister, Kaare Dybvad, is phasing out use of the stigmatising term "ghetto", but still pursuing his right-wing predecessors' policies.

The government insists the ghetto plan's efforts to evict some poorer residents in order to bring in private renters opens up opportunities for left-behind residents. It says it wants to shake immigrant populations out of unproductive self-isolation, in what it calls "parallel societies".

"The objective is to give every child in Denmark the same life opportunities regardless of the neighbourhood they grow up in or of their parents' background," said the Danish ministry of transport and housing in a statement. "This means that they have to be exposed to the cultural norms of society as such and not grow up in closed and isolated communities."

Critics say this is based on false premises and demonisation. "We have had a Danish minister saying Mjølnerparken doesn't live under the Danish constitution but sharia law," says Marie Northrup, a tenants' activist. "This bears no resemblance to the reality on the ground - it's just whipped up in order to discriminate."



Bicycles on Jægersborggade street, Norrebro. Photograph: Annapurna Mellor/Getty Images

An influx of wealthier people is a false panacea, says Northrup. "The idea is that mixing wealthier people here will magically make crime fall, but the truth is that there are areas of [fashionable neighbouring area] Nørrebro that many richer people have moved to with higher crime rates." One example is the notorious hangout of one of Copenhagen's street gangs, an upmarket, postcard-pretty street lined with cafés, boutiques and desirable flats.

Meanwhile, far from non-Danish-born citizens wanting to live in “parallel societies”, the evidence suggests they overwhelmingly want to live in mixed neighbourhoods but struggle because of the national housing crisis.

“We actually did some research into this,” says Hans Skifter Andersen, a professor at the Danish Building Research Institute and author of *Ethnic Spatial Segregation in European Cities*. “We asked non-Danish-born people if they wanted to live in a neighbourhood where the majority came from a non-Danish background. Only 2% said yes.

“What a third of respondents *did* want, however, was to live close to friends and family for practical and emotional support. This proximity was far easier to achieve in the least desirable areas, because rents and waiting lists for housing there were notably shorter.”

Indeed, finding affordable homes in Denmark is a strain for anyone on a lower income, regardless of origin. Rents are often controlled (and co-op housing is more common than owner-occupation) but the most desirable affordable homes are typically circulated through networks of relative privilege, especially in Copenhagen. Those not in the know or wealthy enough to pay top rent struggle. In 2014, the newspaper *Politiken* reported the story of law student Tarek Hussein who was repeatedly offered flats when using the name “Thomas” but rejected for the same ones under his own name, with one prospective landlord saying he “dare not take a chance on a foreigner”.

Consequently, the ghettos have been refuges for those struggling to find housing elsewhere but increasingly that is no longer the case. Mjølnerparken’s residents point to the burgeoning hipness of the neighbouring Nørrebro area, and argue that evicting public tenants is simply a way for the housing association to repurpose the estate for gentrification.

“We have been pressing the housing association to renovate for years, and we have been ignored,” says Mehmood. “Now people from [wealthy] northern Copenhagen are renting their children smaller apartments nearby for high prices.

“The housing association’s reason [for evicting us] is quite clear - they simply want to make some more money.” Eddie Khawaja, a lawyer representing Mehmood as part of a group of Mjølnerparken tenants resisting attempts to move them, goes further. “Right now there is no hard evidence that this housing area, and the two blocks affected in particular, has a higher level of criminality,” he says. “The case we are preparing is based on the notion that the whole idea of passing of legislation is really about something else - targeting specific groups based on religion and ethnic origin.”





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