



**MALMÖ  
UNIVERSITY**

# Family homelessness and conditional welfare in Sweden

-The experience of single migrant mothers in greater Stockholm

# Family homelessness in greater Stockholm

- Gradual increase in the number of 'officially' homeless families. At least 1693 children were placed in emergency accommodation in 2018.
- Households headed by a single mother with a foreign background are overrepresented among those seeking support from statutory services.
- There is no social housing sector in Sweden as historically the public housing sector was meeting those needs.
- Increase in insecure housing arrangements – lodgings, sublets, sofa surfing etc. A 'parallel' housing market is developing in greater Stockholm. It is characterized by insecurity, transient arrangements and a lack of legal rights.



# **‘Social’ and ‘structural’ homelessness as emerging categories in Swedish welfare discourse**

- "Social" homelessness – individuals who are roofless and classified as 'especially vulnerable' – "usually people with long term substance misuse/addiction, mental health issues or another condition which result in long lasting disability".
- "The majority of the families in this mapping exercise do not belong to the especially vulnerable groups that social services have a housing responsibility for, however they do belong to a vulnerable group with significant need for support and help from social services."

- **Families with children, immigrants and those with low-incomes do not belong to the group ‘especially vulnerable’**
- **Landlords’ requirements with regard to for example secure employment, income and references does not mean that the condition ‘especially vulnerable’ is fulfilled.**
- **Under certain conditions, a refusal of further support may be justifiable on the grounds that the person must also try to find housing in another locality.**

(extract from presentation by ‘the housing support team’ in a municipality bordering the city of Stockholm).

# Social assistance in Sweden

- Regulated through the Social Service Act which is a framework law
- Content of the law depend on local arbitration and assessment by street level bureaucrats.
- Eligibility with support for emergency accommodation based on eligibility for social assistance rather than housing need.
- Assessments based on the adult's financial situation.
- To be eligible you have to be virtually destitute – an immediate need here and now.

# Conditionality and social assistance

- There have always been some elements of control attached to social assistance in Sweden. However, harsher activation requirements and sanctions have gradually been introduced over the past 20 years.
- Shift from poverty as the problem, to social assistance as the problem and thereby those that are in need (Hjort, 2019)
- Previous research show that in Sweden conditionality and sanctioning often take localized forms (Thoren 2008).
- Can also vary between different districts in the same city and for different clients (Hedblom, 2004).
- There is a danger of arbitrary exercise of power over citizens in dependent situations connected to discretion in democracy (Molander, 2016).

# Conditionality and housing

- Many mothers described that in their 'planning documents' they were required to "actively look for housing" – this meant that they had to show evidence that they were applying for between 20 and 40 lodgings or sublets every week. In some cases they were required to demonstrate that they were looking for housing all over Sweden.
- Some mothers described how they were mandated to attend 'house searching schools' – sessions organised by the social service locality once or twice every week.
- Mothers in emergency or temporary accommodation were not allowed to have visitors and could receive unannounced visits from social workers.
- If a social worker judged that they failed to fulfil these conditions they could be sanctioned through withdrawal of assistance with emergency accommodation.



"I would like to know what your laws are, the social service law, who can you help? Who can't you help? I would like to understand how it works because you tell me 'find a flat that cost 12,000'. I find a flat that cost 12,000 and then you say my manager has not approve. It's like you are playing with people. Like we are toilet paper that you use and throw away...And you have written here that I have to look for 20 flats, but at Blocket the flats cost 12,000, 13,000, 14,000 and just to please you I write it down. I look, I write it down and bring it in. It's done. I follow the conditions you have put on me, but what kind of conditions is this? You will not accept the flat that cost 12,000, but you are happy to renew the hotel because I have filled out the form. But do you understand that you are not helping me?"

”This thing about the ’house-searching’ school and those lists. We all know it gives nothing. It’s just to keep us in their control. That’s all it is about. Nobody has got a flat from attending the ’house-searching school’ I have lived in Sweden for eight years. I have never seen this before, only recently in this municipality. In other municipalities, even if you can’t find a flat at least they offer you some sort of hostel. The ’house-searching-school’ is just used as an excuse by the council. They say ’Oh we have offered them help, they don’t want to move anywhere else so now they need to leave’. That is the only reason why they have it. All they want is for us to disappear as they see us as hopeless cases. They don’t want us here...”

”She [the social worker] said ’housing is your responsibility and you have to sort it out by yourself’. I said I do everything I can and I asked them to stop threatening to take my children everytime we talk to each other. Then the other social worker said ’this is how it works in Sweden. If you can’t find somewhere to live we will take them in to care’. I asked them if there is a law in Sweden that says that if children have no where to live they should be taken in to care? She said ’yes, that is how it is’. So then I said ’In that case I want to see the law. I want to see it in writing. She said ’no I can’t show you but that is the way it is’.”



## Conclusions

- Conditionality is applied at random across greater Stockholm.
- Conditionality appear to only fulfill a controlling role.
- There is no evidence that conditions and sanctions are effective in moving these families any closer to securing adequate housing.
- Sanctions overlook the safeguarding and well-being of children.
- Housing emergencies are often confused with the loss or lack of parenting skills casting homeless mothers as 'bad parents'.
- The division between 'social' and 'structural' homelessness risk creating new gendered and racialized categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.



**MALMÖ  
UNIVERSITY**

[tove.samzelius@mau.se](mailto:tove.samzelius@mau.se)