
Gatekeeping, Managing Homelessness and Administrating Housing for the Poor: The Three Functions of Local Housing Services for People Experiencing Homelessness in Sweden

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➤ **Abstract_** Homelessness constitutes a growing area of concern for policy-makers and service providers across Europe and beyond. One of the aims of this study was to explore and compare how local social services organise and manage housing services for the homeless. The other was to study specific and detailed functions of local housing services for the homeless, such as rules and regulations regarding interventions and how they are specified in different types of municipalities. Previous research has shown that housing services for the homeless are growing throughout Sweden. Today, about 1.5% of all rental contracts in Sweden are subleased as social contracts through local social services. This study used semi-structured interviews with professionals in charge of homelessness in 30 Swedish municipalities to explore the institutional settings and management of local housing services for the homeless. The results suggest that local housing services for the homeless, although varying in size and complexity, share three overarching functions: gatekeeping, managing the homeless, and administrating housing for the poor. All three functions focused, in different ways, on handling the homeless rather than ending homelessness. It is also clear that the majority of the work conducted by social services regarding housing is more similar to housing administration than social work.

➤ **Keywords_** *Homelessness, social services, municipalities, semi-structured interviews, exploratory approach*

Introduction

In Sweden, as well as Europe, understanding the range, strength, and limitations of the available services for the homeless is a key factor in trying to grasp the scope of the homelessness issue (Pleace et al., 2019; Sahlin, 2006). The number of people experiencing homelessness at a local level is often interpreted as a result of both individual and structural factors, such as substance use and lack of affordable housing. However, several studies suggest that the type of services used and the way services for the homeless are organised and managed have a strong impact on lowering the levels of homelessness at the local level (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Sahlin, 2007; Pleace et al., 2018; Tsemberis, 2010). In a Swedish context, studies have shown that the organisation of local services for the homeless is central to the homelessness problem (Sahlin, 2007; Blid, 2008; Löfstrand, 2005; Knutagård, 2008; Wirehag, 2019). For example, persons receiving housing support from social services at the local level do not seem to transition into self-sufficient housing, but instead stay in temporary solutions provided by the social services for long periods of time. Furthermore, there seems to be an unclear division of responsibility between local public landlords and local social services regarding the issue of assisting vulnerable groups with sufficient housing (Sahlin, 2007; Grander, 2018).

In Sweden, governance of social issues such as homelessness is mainly characterised by a low degree of state involvement. Instead, soft governance is exercised, predominantly through recommendations, guidelines, and information (Sahlin, 2015). This steering model leaves great scope for municipalities to manoeuvre and organise services for the homeless as they wish, as long as they fulfil the legal obligations specified in the Social Services Act (SSA) (Bengtsson and Karlsson, 2012). At a municipal level, local social services are responsible for governing, managing, and financing services for the homeless (Sahlin, 2006; Benjaminsen, 2016; Dyb, 2017). Local social services have the same legal obligations to provide both general and targeted services to people at risk of becoming, or who already are, homeless. The legal framework of the SSA defines the right to general social assistance and specifies some interventions targeting homelessness, such as the right to shelter (SSA, Ch. 4, Section 1). However, the SSA does not clearly specify what type of shelter, for how long, or what individual conditions need to be fulfilled for a person to be provided with housing (Blid, 2008).

The general wording of the law is that municipalities are ultimately responsible for ensuring that persons “staying within their boundaries receive the support and assistance they need” (SSA, Ch. 2, Section 1) as well as “a reasonable standard of living” (SSA, Ch. 4, Section 1). The interpretation of these formulations is largely up to the judgment of local professionals, politicians, and administrative courts (Sahlin, 2020). Recent years have shown examples of how local social services,

especially in large cities, have created very strict regulations, including a re-categorisation of groups so that some are excluded from the target groups of local housing services for the homeless (Kjellbom, 2019; Sahlin, 2020). This Swedish situation is very different from, for instance, Scotland, where the legal framework for the responsibilities of local social services is both stronger and clearer (Anderson and Serpa, 2013).

At present, 27 400 persons live with subleased so-called social contracts administered by the local housing services for the homeless¹ in Sweden, compared with approximately 10 000-12 000 persons ten years ago (Boverket, 2020). Social contracts are currently the most common method used by local social services to house the homeless. Subleased flats represent approximately 1.5% of all rental contracts currently available on the rental market in Sweden. Furthermore, the homelessness issue has changed from one predominantly handled by social services in urban municipalities to one that also affects local social services in small and rural municipalities. Despite this new geographical scope, recent studies have shown that most municipalities lack political strategies for homelessness (Socialstyrelsen, 2020; Wirehag, 2019). The annual housing market survey conducted by Boverket, the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building, and Planning (NBHBP), has included questions on the organisation of services for the homeless since 2009.

The number of questions has increased over the years and, more recently, provided a good overarching picture of which interventions are used across municipalities. However, the results of this survey say little about how these interventions are specified or how cooperation with other actors is organised, and which rules and regulations are used to govern interventions at local level. A recent discussion initiated by the European Observatory of Homelessness (EOH) has highlighted the importance of collecting comparative data on the institutional settings and the terms and regulations that govern services for the homeless at international, national, and local level (Pleace et al., 2018; Pleace et al., 2019). As part of this initiative, a European typology of services for the homeless has been developed. This work-in progress typology can be used as a tool to systematically categorise housing services for the homeless and the methodological ideologies they represent. The typology divides different services on a continuum moving from support focused interventions such as 1) low intensity, temporary, or basic housing support such as night shelters towards; 2) high intensity temporary housing support

¹ Refers to the local social services organisation created to house the homeless. The definition largely overlaps Sahlin's (1996) term 'the secondary housing market'. However, by definition, 'local housing services for the homeless' focuses more on the organisation of all housing provided by social services to house the homeless than 'the secondary housing market', which focuses more on the social contracts subleased by social services.

(treatment focused) towards housing focused; 3) high intensity support using ordinary housing such as Housing First models; and 4) low intensity support using ordinary housing such as social contracts.

The typology provides a possibility to categorise and understand how housing services for the homeless are organised both at a national and a local level (for an extensive description of the typology see Pleace et al., 2018). In Swedish homelessness research, a number of studies have provided different viewpoints on understanding the organisation of the local housing services for the homeless (for example Sahlin, 1996; Nordfeldt, 1999; Löfstrand-Hansen, 2005; Blid, 2008; and Knutagård, 2008). However, as several recent studies have shown (Wirehag, 2019; Knutagård, 2018; Boverket, 2020), further comparative qualitative data at local level across Sweden are needed regarding the way housing services for the homeless are organised, the kind of rules and regulations used, as well as the outcomes of services for the homeless in terms of moving individuals into self-sufficient living conditions.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the study was twofold: 1) to investigate qualitatively how local housing services for the homeless were organised and managed across different municipalities, in particular concerning rules and regulations regarding interventions, and 2) to study the actors involved in providing housing services for the homeless and how cooperation was organised between social services and other actors, in particular local landlords. The more specific research questions were:

1. Who is considered eligible for housing services due to homelessness and how are assessments made according to the participants?
2. How are housing services for the homeless organised?
3. What types of methods and housing measures are used?
4. How are social contracts defined and managed?
5. How is the cooperation between social services and landlords organised regarding social contracts?

Understanding Local Housing Services for the Homeless

Previous research focusing on the organisation of services for the homeless in a Swedish context has used different theoretical, geographical, and methodological starting points. This paper loosely builds on the theoretical framework of Knutagård (2008) and applies several perspectives on human service organisations (HSO) that address the question of how and why organisations are organised the way they are. The overall design of the analysis is inspired by Hasenfeld's (1983, 2010) theories on human service organisations and the people-processing, people-sustaining, and people-changing technologies that HSOs typically develop and build their organisation around to be able to process their 'raw material', namely people. The organisational perspective put forward by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) on the organisation and working methods within HSOs is also used as a theoretical framework. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that HSOs are influenced by strong powers from their surrounding society or institutional environment. The development is influenced, in particular, by the moral, regulative, economic, and political structures upheld by mainstream society (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that HSOs tend to develop organisational fields, with every field developing its own logic and norms that the organisations in each field must follow, regardless of efficiency or function.

In line with this, Knutagård (2008) argues that local services for the homeless should be considered a niche within a larger organisational field that other actor's control. The social services' power is limited when it comes to acquiring flats to sublease as social contracts. Knutagård (2008) also highlights the dialectic relation between organisation and categorisation. Local social services have to categorise potential clients out of necessity in order to process them into the organisations' pre-existing categories and by doing so automatically attribute them a low or high social status. Hasenfeld (2010) argues that HSOs that handle clients categorised as having a high social status and seen as deserving and victims of circumstances outside of their control, such as domestic violence, tend to develop technologies focusing on their clients' actual needs. If the clients are categorised as having a low social status and being undeserving, HSOs instead develop and employ technologies focusing on control, punishment, and conditional support.

Method

The data collection was conducted during Spring and Autumn 2019. A total of 30 participants from 30 municipalities were included in the study (approximately 10% of Sweden's municipalities). The municipalities were chosen based on geographical location as well as type. Four different municipality types² were used: 1. Large cities (excluding the three biggest), 2. Commuting municipalities (those in close geographic proximity to densely populated areas), 3. Small cities/municipalities, and 4. Rural municipalities. In the results section, a letter and a number will follow each quote; for example, L1-L8 means Large city numbers 1-8; C1-C7 is for Commuting municipalities 1-7; S1-S8 is for Small city 1-8; and R1-R7 is for Rural municipality 1-7. The data were collected through semi-structured telephone interviews. The participants were all employees within local social services and chosen on the basis of their positions. All of the participants had an overview of the management of homeless housing services in their respective municipality.

The interview guide focused on four themes: 1) the assessment and evaluation of the eligibility of clients at local level, 2) the methods and management of housing services for the homeless at local level, 3) the actors involved in the housing services for the homeless, and 4) the organisation of processes focusing on transitioning clients towards self-sufficient housing. Each theme included of a number of follow-up questions based on the responses of the participants. The interviews were conducted, tape-recorded, and transcribed by the author. The average length of the interviews was 30 minutes.

Methodological considerations

Semi-structured interviewing is possibly the most widespread qualitative interview method used (Warren, 2002). There are several benefits of using this methodology. Compared with structured interviews, the semi-structured method makes better use of dialogue and allows for follow-up questions on pre-determined themes. Compared with unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow for a more focused conversation and allows the interviewee to take up more time during the interview. However, one of the effects of using semi-structured interviews in this study was that they tended to become longer through the data collection period due to the constantly evolving nature of the method and the interviewer's familiarity with the specific questions and follow-up questions (Brinkmann, 2014).

Apart from allowing for a wide geographical spread of participants, conducting the interviews by telephone had several other benefits. As Shuy (2002) highlights, a contextual naturalness is created by the distance when using the telephone as a

² The four municipality types are an adaptation of Statistics Sweden's typology of Swedish municipalities, which uses nine different municipality types.

medium. This distance not only reduces the interviewer effect but also creates “more symmetrical distribution of interactive power, greater effectiveness with complex issues, more thoughtful responses, and the fact that such interviews are better in relation to sensitive questions” (Brinkmann, 2014, p.290). In the interviews, the respondents seemed comfortable and answered even sensitive questions openly, which may have been an effect of the contextual naturalness and distance created by the telephone (Shuy, 2002).

Analysis

There are many different ways to analyse interviews, where one side of the methods spectrum focus lies the primarily descriptive reports, the ‘what’ in the communication, while at the other end there are methods focusing on the discursive ‘how’ accounts (Brannen, 1992). In this study, the respondents are treated largely as information holders, and the focus of the analysis lies in trying to get as close as possible to what they say rather than how they say it. The scope of this study was limited to 30 municipalities, even if the sample was chosen to be as representative as possible. Wider generalisations should therefore be drawn with caution.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted in five steps, beginning with the transcription of the interviews. Step two entailed reading through the interviews and identifying thematic differences and similarities in them. Step three focused on highlighting quotes and sentences and starting to identify themes throughout the interviews. The fourth step involved cutting out and collecting key sentences and quotes under common themes. The fifth step consisted of sorting the reduced interviews into themes in relation to the theoretical framework, which is presented in the results. In the quotes, the transcription marker (...) is used for omitted speech, and the author’s edits, such as explanations of unclear subjects, are placed within brackets [].

Results

The analysis shows that local housing services for the homeless in the municipalities were built around three general functions. The first function, *gatekeeping*, categorised, assessed, and decided if individuals fitted the local social services’ requirements to receive housing due to homelessness. The second function, *managing homelessness*, provided different types of housing interventions for the individuals that passed the gatekeeping process with a positive result. The matching of housing interventions with individuals was based on existing client categories within the local social service organisation. The third function, *adminstrating housing for the poor*, focused on providing one specific housing intervention: social contracts. In general, the local housing services for the homeless had little power

to decide on the organisation and rules regulating social contracts. Very little effort was put into follow-up and support in relation to how other types of housing interventions were arranged by the local services for the homeless. Furthermore, the administration of social contracts was the biggest function in terms of numbers in all 30 municipalities. These functions covered issues that all 30 municipalities had to deal with, however, the ways in which responses were developed and designed varied. Notably, there is a similarity between the three identified functions and Hasenfeld's (2010) three technologies: people-processing, people-changing, and people-sustaining, which will be addressed in the discussion.

Gatekeeping

The gatekeeping function assesses which individuals should receive housing due to homelessness, i.e., who are homeless in a support-worthy way? Three sub-functions were identified: 1) the assessment of all individuals, 2) the processing-in of those deemed eligible, and 3) the keeping-out of those assessed as non-eligible.

Organising the assessment process

The legal framework of the SSA and a few case law verdicts provide the legal basis around which local housing services for the homeless build their assessment process. However, there are no regulations on how the organisation that was tasked with solving the assessment process should be structured. The interviews showed that there were big differences between municipalities in relation to how they had organised their assessment processes. One participant stated:

It has been a bit so-so with them [the assessments]. They have been handled by different parts of social services, and they have different views on how to handle them. If you ask me, I would say that the assessments have not always been based on case law and legislation. (...) It varied greatly how this was handled. That has been one of the problems in this municipality; I recognise it from my old job [social services in another municipality]. (C2)

Another participant described the assessment organisation as a more structured process:

Previously we had an organisation that took assignments from other units internally, when a person was in need of a flat. The housing section didn't conduct the assessment (...), but in 2016 we had a re-organisation and then we [the housing section] hired four investigators to handle the assessment process as well, and since then they [the clients] turn to us with the applications. (L5)

One theme that emerged in the interviews was the extent to which social services had general responsibility for assisting persons in need of housing. The idea that social services are not and should not become a housing agency was expressed by several of the interviewees. The idea was connected to a general feeling that social services were overwhelmed with too much responsibility for the housing issue as a whole at local level. Several participants discussed the importance of ensuring the assessment of who was eligible for housing interventions as strict as possible to prevent social services becoming a housing agency. One participant said:

We are fairly restrictive... we don't want social services to turn into a housing agency (...) with them [social services] being the primary option in these situations [homelessness]. If someone applies for housing, who is obviously homeless or doesn't have anywhere to spend the night, the first thing we do is to try to make them find housing in another way, at a hostel or campsite, maybe contact and apply for acute welfare relief [another part of social services] to see if they can pay for a place at a hostel or a campsite cottage. (R4)

Another participant described a similar idea regarding the application process: "It is a bottleneck to receive housing through the housing services for the homeless. It is definitely a strategy to prevent everybody using social services as a housing [agency]" (L1). However, there were diverging accounts among the participants. One participant stated that:

We follow the SSA and case law, but we think that case law has become too (...), how should I put it (...), too narrow (...) Because it [the case law] is very strict. We have started to think about this. Actually, we have written a new policy, but it has not been adopted yet. (L2)

Requirements

One theme that emerged in the interviews related to the assessment process was the detailed requirements used by local housing services when assessing which individuals should receive housing due to homelessness. In relation to approving housing for short periods of time, the requirements were very similar across the interviewed municipalities. Common examples of specific requirements, in relation to short-term housing, were transcripts of bank statements and other proof of lack of money and/or of possibilities to arrange housing for themselves. However, in some cases when the person was 'known' to social services, no such proof was needed. One participant said: "When talking about short-term acute housing for the night, it is often an issue for the financial unit of social services, where you sit down and account for your financial situation and the reasons why you are applying for housing" (S5). A similar account was provided by another participant: "The administrator looks at the SSA and examines if you have somewhere to stay the night, any other possibility, if you are generally approved for short term-housing" (C3).

In contrast to the requirements used when assessing short-term interventions, those used when approving housing for longer periods of time, such as social contracts, varied greatly across municipalities. Some municipalities took a more lenient approach, specifying a few formal requirements, focusing mainly on debts and lack of income, which is a step away from the stricter intentions of the SSA and current case law. One participant expressed that: "If we are talking about [long-term] contracts, then there is strong focus on social difficulties, debts and no income. Those are the two major issues we look at" (S3). In another example of a more lenient approach, one participant declared: "You should have tried to find housing by yourself. You should also have a hard time, due to debts and other difficulties, finding housing. If there's no possibility then there is a chance of getting a social contract" (C5). However, there were several examples of municipalities with a stricter approach that provided a long list of requirements that individuals needed to fulfil before an investigation could proceed. "Yes, everything has to be exhausted. They should have made contact with landlords outside of the municipality (...), you should be in a housing queue (...); everything has to be exhausted, so to speak, for us to move in and provide a [long-term] social contract" (S2). The variations between municipalities could not be clearly related to demographical or geographical differences.

Who is in?

Another theme that emerged in the interviews centred around the individuals who were categorised as eligible for housing due to homelessness. Apart from being homeless, who were they? Did the municipalities assist individuals in the same type of homeless situations? Interestingly, participants, when asked which situations would provide housing, had a strong focus on social problems, not housing needs. Participants listed groups that would be prioritised to receive housing due to homelessness. These groups (very similar in all 30 municipalities) largely overlapped the groups and social problems that social services traditionally work with, such as persons with substance use issues, mental illness, problematic family relationships, and single mothers. A typical account was "we have the especially vulnerable groups: persons with mental illness, substance abuse and families. Those are the ones we always look at and try to get a grip on" (R1). Young persons were also mentioned as a prioritised group to receive housing due to homelessness. Families, especially single mothers with children, were highlighted as particularly vulnerable and prioritised for housing.

Who is out?

The interviews showed several examples of different keeping-out processes. One participant stated: "We often discuss with the administrators what it is that needs to be assessed, namely the person's ability to access housing on their own, not their current housing status..." (L3). In addition, undocumented persons who lack

housing are often excluded from housing services for the homeless altogether, even if they fulfil the criteria of local social services (Wirehag et al., 2020). Twenty-eight municipalities stated that they did not assist or even know about undocumented persons in their municipality. One participant argued that: “There are no policies for how we should work with that group [undocumented], so if you don’t have Swedish citizenship, we don’t work with them, period” (R3). Another participant said that “It would take a VERY acute situation such as a pregnant single woman for us to approve housing for more than a night at a hostel” (R1). Most of the participants stated that mainly persons who are registered in the municipality are eligible for housing services for the homeless, at least for more than a night or two. This keeping-out action is a clear example of when individuals are excluded because of a mismatch with the pre-existing categories of the organisation.

However, divergent accounts were also provided. One participant stated that they had assisted undocumented persons with long-term housing stating that “Over Christmas we provided housing for a man with a deportation decision [undocumented]; I know we shouldn’t do it according to the legislation, but what can we do when it’s 20 degrees below zero” (R2). Later in the interview, the person had been offered a social contract by social services and lived there at the time of the interview. This statement demonstrates that there is still room for different interpretations regarding eligibility, with some local homeless housing organisations being more flexible in their interpretations. The different interpretations of who should receive housing due to homelessness show that the need for housing in itself is not enough. Instead, it is the social problems attributed to individuals that qualify them for housing. Certain groups such as the undocumented are excluded altogether and not even considered homeless but are categorised as undeserving, having ‘chosen’ to be in a homeless situation (Pettersson, 2017).

Managing people experiencing homelessness

After the initial gatekeeping process, individuals who were approved for housing services due to homelessness were forwarded in the organisation to different sections of social services managing homelessness. All 30 participants described a situation in which the staircase model had a strong influence over the organisation of managing the homeless, directly or indirectly. The staircase model builds on the idea of qualification, moving up the ladder when fulfilling the demands set up at each step, moving down the ladder if the person breaks the rules connected to each step (Sahlin, 2007). Nineteen participants stated that the municipality built its overarching method on the staircase model. The remaining 11 participants, when asked, said that their municipality did not use the staircase model as such. Although when describing their overarching structure, all 11 descriptions were very similar to the basic concepts connected to the staircase model, such as the ideas of qualifying

for housing by proving worthy. As exemplified by one statement: "It's not a term we use [staircase], but we have organised it in a chain, just so we know what we are doing and which of the applicants for housing to assess" (L1).

The size and structure of the staircase model varied greatly in the studied municipalities. Some participants described a small-scale structure with only a few steps between acute housing and long-term housing: "We don't have a method as such, but if someone comes back from [drug] treatment we don't put them in a low-threshold housing solution but in a so-called practice flat" (S4). Another participant describes the staircase model in these terms: "We have a small staircase so to speak, first a 'practice' flat then a social contract" (S5). Some participants, however, described large-scale staircase models and a long line of steps up the staircase. One participant describes the situation in these terms: "We are currently trying to shorten the staircase model; there are just so many steps before you can reach the ordinary housing market" (L7).

Housing interventions for low status clients

Of the 30 municipalities, 16 had some type of shelter or low-threshold housing solution. These were predominantly run in cooperation with or by NGOs themselves. When asked if they had a shelter in the municipality, a typical answer was: "We don't call it a shelter, but we do have one. We absolutely do not call it a shelter, but we call it acute housing... you are let in by 15.30 and have to be out before 09.00 the next morning" (S3). This statement is one of several examples of the ambiguous role of these low-threshold solutions within social services, trying to rebrand them into solutions with a more positive connotation. It was also clear that low status housing solutions were reserved for individuals with certain social issues, as exemplified by this statement: "Persons with substance use will be referred to a shelter with staff (...)" (C1). When asked what other types of interventions were used in the municipalities, the participants described several low status interventions that were used for semi-long placements. Acute housing was one example of an intervention used when "Persons come out of rehab and come home. It's an in-between before you can move into your own flat. It's a place to assess how the person copes" (S5).

Many of the low status housing interventions described by the participants were run by private actors, and persons were placed there for periods of 3-6 months. One commuting municipality said: "We buy a lot of interventions right now (...) for 61 individuals (...) we buy interventions from private companies in a large city close by" (C4). The participants also described interventions with the intention of long placements of six months to a year, referred to as 'practice', 'trial', or 'reference' flats. These interventions often had a lower degree of social control and were considered a stepping stone towards a social contract. One participant described it in these terms: "Connected to the housing with support [the previous step], we

have four furnished practice flats, and they are a step in-between waiting for a social contract” (S5). What the different interventions were called seemed to be connected to ideas of control and social services’ rights to control the flats. One participant (C2) described an intervention they called ‘support housing’ that they had created after “a decision from the parliamentary ombudsman”. By calling it support housing instead of housing with support, social services had an extended right to control and access the flats. Several municipalities also described a number of interventions that functioned outside the staircase model. For instance, six of the 30 municipalities described what is referred to in research as last-resort solutions (Emerson, 1981). One rural municipality described it in these terms:

We have a property, owned directly by the municipality, with 6-8 flats where it’s been decided that the down-and-out chronic alcoholics should live (...). That property is a disgrace; it is in a dreadful state. We have sanitized it for cockroaches, but it doesn’t help. They [the clients] have social contracts and there is no staff. We [social services] have contact with them [the clients] and go there from time to time to see how they are doing (...) Before we had housing with support with 24-hour staff (...) but it didn’t work so it was closed a couple of years ago (R2).

Housing interventions for high status clients

All 30 municipalities use campsites or hostels as a first-response housing intervention. However, campsites and hostels seem to be primarily for families or persons with no obvious social issues, such as substance use or mental illness. As one participant said: “If someone shows up who is completely without housing, and they show up in the morning, we tell them to try to fix something by themselves. If they come back at 16.00, then we will sort something out, maybe a cabin or a night at a hostel” (R2). Several participants described the use of semi-long-term interventions called, for example, ‘emergency flats’ or ‘reference’ flats that were used to house persons with a low level of social problems, a group often argued to be outside social services’ responsibility. One participant described it in these terms: “We have two emergency flats; its 90% families” (S3). Another participant used similar terms: “Then we have interventions for those... who don’t use substances but have illness or who for some other reason can’t find housing” (R6). A third participant described a more extensive intervention targeting persons with low social needs: “We have another property for families with acute homelessness. It’s an old nursing home that we have taken over and there are 27 small 1- and 2-bedroom flats. It provides housing for families and single parents with kids. There are staff during the day to help with contracts and information” (C3).

Housing First: somewhere in-between

Six municipalities stated that they used Housing First as a method, but only one used first-hand contracts from day one (a basic condition of the original Housing First method). The other five used different types of conditioned contracts sometimes internalising the Housing First model into the staircase model. As one participant described it: “We have a project coming... but it’s not ‘Housing First’, we call it ‘housing now’. We want to shorten the staircase model, have fewer steps” (L7). This particular project used 18-month contracts with the possibility of turning them into tenure. There were also examples of municipalities wishing to start Housing First projects but that stated that: “It is quite far off since it takes landlords who would let us use flats under those conditions” (C4). There were also examples of municipalities that did not know about the method at all: “No, I don’t really know what you are talking about... but I kind of recognise it now that you describe it (...)” (C1). This small-scale, transformed use of Housing First shown in the interviews is confirmed by previous research in Sweden. This is in line with what Knutagård and Kristiansen (2013) showed, namely that Housing First is often changed into Housing First-like models that fit the local context, often as a loosely connected part of the staircase model.

Administrating housing for the poor

The interviews showed that social contracts constituted the majority of interventions in all 30 of the studied municipalities. They also showed that individuals who received social contracts across the municipalities shared characteristics. They were either persons moving up through the housing ladder, categorised as having fewer social issues or had been categorised as having no or few social issues apart from being too poor or having too much debt to qualify for the ordinary housing market. However, the way this function was organised differed. Some of the municipalities studied had built an organisation around the social contracts that was very similar to the functions of a housing agency, with few or no control mechanisms connected to them, treating them as ordinary contracts (although subleased without tenure). Other municipalities had built an organisation around the social contracts allowing more control and the use of special terms and regulations, influenced by the other steps of the staircase model. One participant described the overall organisation of their social contracts with these words: “We have about 50 social contracts today. They just go on and on. We don’t work actively on them at all” (R2). Another participant provided a contrary statement describing a relatively organised system where:



Every six months we have a follow-up with the persons who are renting the flat and look into the possibility of them taking over the contract We are trying not just to let things go on and on... if you can make it on your own, you don't need social services looking over your shoulder. (C5)

The participants provided a wide variety of examples of how long the social contracts would go on before transitioning into either a permanent contract or the persons moved on to a permanent contract that they had acquired by themselves. Some described a more structured organisation in which contracts were evaluated continuously and transitioned into permanent contracts on a regular basis: "We have a contract with the local public landlords and the contracts automatically transfer into permanent contracts with tenure after one year if there hasn't been any disturbance... but they can be prolonged if there have been any problems" (L7). Another participant described their organisation regarding the transition to permanent housing in a contrasting way:

We have a frightening number of persons who have lived with social contracts for fifteen years or longer. And that is not ok... because you may have the wrong surname. This is something we have to change within both social services and public housing companies. (R1)

Another participant described a similar structure regarding the length of social contracts: "It can be anything from a month to god only knows how many years... we don't keep track" (R2). One municipality had taken another approach and organised the transitioning process and the length of social contracts in relation to the length of the ordinary rental queue. "The housing companies demand that the persons in question have to have the same queue time as persons in the ordinary rental housing queue, which in our municipality means 8-10 years in central parts of the municipality" (S4). Several municipalities had no process at all regarding the transition of social contracts. All contracts would go on until the persons moved or the contract was terminated by social services:

I: So, no one can take over their social contracts?

R: No.

I: Waiting to find something by themselves?

R: To find something on their own. (R3)

Cooperation between local social services and landlords

The administration of housing, particularly social contracts, was imbedded in a larger institutional setting where social services had to cooperate with local landlords to attain flats to sublease. The interviews show several examples of the social services limited power when it comes to organising social contracts. They

also showed that the landlords had a highly influential position regarding the functioning of social contracts. For instance, in all the studied municipalities, the landlords had the last word regarding the transition to a permanent lease after social services had assessed the persons as ready. Several participants were critical of this power balance and of the landlord's practice when it came to handing over housing for vulnerable groups.

We have a public housing company with a long tradition of looking down on certain groups (...) They think you should have a social contract if the person doesn't have a strong enough financial situation and that social services should automatically provide a social contract (...) Public housing companies say that they are required to make a profit and that they can't take the risk of losing money on your clients [social services] (...) if they can't have a guarantee that persons living on student loans will have a rental guarantee from social services when the student loans expire. They think the person should have a social contract (...) They have taken it too far in my opinion. (R2)

Several other participants provided examples of cases when the local landlords would prolong the social contract, even after social services had recommended that the contract be translated into a permanent lease. As one participant stated: "We conduct an annual review, but as I said, the large majority get a 'NO' from the landlords due to debts" (C4). Another participant describes it in these terms: "My experience tells me that things often happen along the way... and then our counterpart [landlords] wants to prolong it by another three months... It is after all they [the landlords] who have the decision-making power over social contracts" (S5). Another participant highlights the problem of landlords placing persons in specific areas, a problem that was shared by a number of participants.

As I said, somehow, we are dependent upon the landlord's goodwill. Sometimes we struggle to find flats for our clients even from the local public housing company, and even they want securities for all possible events and would rather find a block somewhere where they could put all social service clients. We [social services] don't want it organised that way. We want persons with social contracts to be mixed in (...) we don't agree with the landlords on this. (C7)

There were contrasting accounts, however, and participants who described their cooperation with the local landlords in more lenient and less critical terms arguing that: "We have great cooperation with them [the public landlords]. They find a suitable flat for the client, and we [social services] sublease it" (S1). Further, there were several examples in the interviews of restrictions set up by local social services to be able to exercise some degree of control. This was most clearly expressed when asked about the period of notice for social contracts. Two of the municipalities used so-called 24-hour contracts. One participant described it in these terms:



The social contracts we have, have a 24-hour period of notice (...) that is the way it is (...) and when it comes to support housing, they don't have any period of notice at all (...) That is just the way it is. It's like in a hospital. When the doctor says it's time to move (...) you move. (C2)

Another participant described a similar practice, stating that: "We establish a contract and it's a so-called 24-hour contract... but it goes both ways..." and continues: "If someone wants to move, they can just leave and pay for one day" (C1). Among the other 28 municipalities, the length of the period of notice varied, stretching from a two-week notice to a month, and in one case up to three months. However, most were considerably shorter than the three-month period that is customary for the ordinary rental market.

Discussion

The main findings of the interviews show that local housing services for the homeless in Sweden are built around three main functions: gatekeeping, managing homelessness, and administrating housing for the poor. This means, on the two-dimensional continuum proposed by the European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH), that local homeless housing services in the studied municipalities moved in opposite directions. They tend to use both support-focused (people-changing) interventions and housing-focused (people-sustaining) interventions, such as social contracts, at the same time. One section of the organisation concentrates on administrating housing, at one end of the continuum proposed by the EOH, while the other focuses on managing homelessness, at the other end of the spectrum, with heavy focus on support.

Furthermore, the results show a strong link between pre-existing client categories (families, substance users, and people with mental illness) and the organisation's decisions regarding which groups to admit or keep out of the local housing services for the homeless. Further, the interviews clearly show that the processing-in of potential clients into local housing services for the homeless categorised them as either underserving or deserving people experiencing homelessness and provided them with different types of housing interventions based on these categories. The keeping-out and processing-in of clients also shows a duality in the way that social services relate to their clients. Individuals without 'certain social needs' are generally considered not to be the target groups of social services' homelessness interventions and should be kept out.

However, if they for some reason were still approved for housing, the groups with low social needs seem to receive higher quality housing with less or no social control. On the other hand, the groups that were generally considered to be the

target groups of social services and that would be downgraded across all municipalities were single adults, especially male. As Knutagård (2008) showed, social workers have to adapt to the surrounding institutional setting, categorising persons living in homelessness based on the organisation's prerequisites rather than on the persons' actual needs. From this perspective, the internal organisation of local housing services for the homeless reflects the needs of social services rather than the needs of potential clients.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe where the ideas and values of the social work profession influence the structure of how homelessness should be solved. The social service organisation as a whole is focused on social problems, with the problems having to be solved before any other progress can be made. This can lead to a situation in which individuals are transformed from a person in need of housing to a substance user without housing. Knutagård (2008) argues that there are no clear regulations regarding the use of interventions in Swedish municipalities and that practices differ across municipalities. Furthermore, he argues that social services are characterised by an imagined scale stretching from the street to a flat with tenure. Depending on which social issues individuals were attributed when applying for housing, they were, at the same time, assigned different levels of status, categorising them as deserving or underserving. There is a ranking of housing interventions in which some, such as social contracts, have a higher status and are matched with individuals with a higher status categorised as deserving.

The interviews showed a similar pattern to that put forward by Knutagård (2008). The staircase model created an overarching structure, but the individual's status was the determining factor for where on the staircase they would be placed when applying for housing. The housing interventions found in the municipalities ranged from low-threshold housing, shelters, camping, and hostels to residential housing with staff, 'practice flats', and 'emergency flats', to social contracts. The interviews showed that the way different interventions were used across the studied municipalities differed. However, matching low status interventions with low status individuals and vice versa was common practice in all of the studied municipalities (cf. Hasenfeld, 2010). Depending on the type of municipality, the methods to provide housing differed. For instance, there were several examples of commuting municipalities buying housing solutions from their larger and more urbanised neighbours, through this keeping the clients at hands length.

As the results show, there is a strong reluctance within social services to become some sort of housing agency. Despite this, social contracts were the most widespread intervention in Sweden (Wirehag, 2019). A key finding is that there appeared to be two different housing administration strategies. Some municipalities have built their organisation around social contracts, almost like a rental market, by

treating clients like tenants using a three-month notice and letting the contacts continue over long periods of time. Other municipalities use very short periods of notice as a means of keeping a degree of control. One possible explanation for this could be that the staircase model heavily influences the overall methods and ideas on how to organise the local services for the homeless. The Housing First methodology was used but seemed to have no influence over the overall organisation of methods in the studied municipalities.

In their latest housing market survey, Boverket (2020) showed that 213 out of the 248 municipalities that used social contracts aimed for a transition of the contracts into ordinary rental contracts with tenure. However, the results of the interviews show that the terms and regulations concerning the realisation of this transition varied. Some municipalities had fixed timelines for contract evaluation, while others evaluated the contracts solely based on individual conditions. A possible explanation for this variation may be that the final decision to move from a subleased to a tenured contract was not made by social services but by the landlords. The heavy influence of the landlords over the rental process can also explain the tendency to provide persons with a low degree of social needs with high status housing solutions.

It is clear that the lack of national governance regarding the organisation and management of services for the homeless has created a situation in which social services do not have the full mandate on important issues, such as the transition out of social contracts, and thus they are unable to assist individuals from homelessness all the way to permanent tenure. Further, social contracts are not only the most widespread type of intervention used across local services for the homeless but also the most used type of intervention in all responding municipalities. Based on this, the general organisation currently dominating homeless housing services in Sweden, using the EOH typology, is an organisation dominated by housing-focused social contracts with low intensity support. This part of the housing services for the homeless show strong resemblance to social housing systems in other parts of Europe where low-income groups have access to a reserved small section of the housing stock. However, the Swedish system seems to have developed an ad-hoc hybrid organisation. In European countries that use social housing systems, the contracts generally have security of tenure and an organisation built on political decisions.

Concluding Remarks

This research set out to study the organisation of local housing services for the homeless in Swedish municipalities. One of the most troublesome results of the study is the finding that social services lack the decision-making power over key functions regarding the services they provide, such as the transition of social contracts into permanent contracts. This structure not only limits the possibilities to assist persons to their own contracts but limits and downgrades the judgment of social work professionals. The interviews also showed that the organisation of local housing services for the homeless can be divided into three functions: gate-keeping, managing social issues (both of which are traditional aspects of social work practice), and administrating housing for the poor. Administrating housing for the poor as a function is not new within social services. However, it has grown significantly in the last 15 years. Nonetheless, due to the reluctant position of social services, the administration of housing for the poor has ended up in a grey area within the social service organisation, where rules and aims can best be described as unclear, and moreover, are organised and carried out hesitantly, almost unwillingly.

The interviews also show that the devil is in the detail. To be able to understand the consequences of organisational differences, it is not enough to know if municipalities have, for example, a certain intervention (which is the information that Boverket and Socialstyrelsen gather from municipalities today). Behind the names of different interventions, a multitude of different local practices is hiding. The details of these contracts are crucial to understanding the function and outcomes of the interventions. There is, thus, a definite need for policy and practice to focus on the detailed function of interventions in the continued mappings of this field.

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