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# Homelessness in Sweden

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## Introduction

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In 1980, Sweden was a leading welfare state in many ways and the word homeless or homelessness was seldom used among social workers. Sweden is governed by the government and parliament and is divided into 21 regions and 290 municipalities. The regions are responsible for health care and regional transport infrastructure, but otherwise the municipalities are largely self-governing. Homelessness is now a major social problem in Sweden, as in many other countries. A common denominator behind the causes of homelessness is poverty. In addition, the main cause of homelessness is a lack of housing, and in particular rental apartments with reasonable rents that allow people with low incomes to enter the rental market.

In 1993, the first national homelessness survey was conducted in Sweden, which now takes place every six years. In 2011, the mapping indicators were changed to be more harmonious with a simpler ETHOS version. The 2017 survey showed 33 000 people experiencing homelessness, excluding refugees, undocumented people, and the travelling people. Sweden has a higher proportion of people experiencing homelessness per thousand inhabitants compared to our Nordic neighbours. The research indicates that this may have to do with the development of the secondary housing market in Sweden. Of the total number of people experiencing homelessness in Sweden in April 2017, half were in this situation, according to the National Board of Health and Welfare.

No Housing First without houses, is a quote that has been used many times when Housing First is to be implemented in a municipality or district. It is a recurring problem, but not only in Sweden. One trend is that more and more people in the total homelessness population have no problems other than that they lack a home of their own. This is usually referred to as structural homelessness. Another trend is that the proportion of women and the share of people with a foreign background is increasing. The number of children affected by homelessness is also growing.

Sweden does not have a social housing sector. It is public housing, which is the rental properties owned by a municipality, that, via ownership directives, must ensure that socially excluded people still have somewhere to live. It worked quite well until 2011, when the EU gave new directives that all public housing should be conducted according to the articles of association (K(2011) 9380 (2012/21/EU)). For competition between private property owners and public housing to also be equal, municipalities could no longer subsidise rents. This, together with the fact that housing construction decreased, gradually created higher thresholds for entering the regular housing market.

Housing companies and other property owners determine in a rental policy who can be considered as their tenants. Municipalities can decide this for the housing companies they own. But reducing homelessness and providing apartments for people experiencing homelessness is unfortunately rarely the municipalities only priority. Often, the interest in preventing losses or increasing profits and tax revenues weighs more heavily. The main cause of homelessness is a lack of housing, i.e., affordable rental apartments that people with low incomes can pay. A strong contributing factor is the landlords demands for fixed income, references, and queue time. Of Sweden's 290 municipalities, 83% state that they have a lack of housing.

## **The Secondary Housing Market and Social Housing**

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The term secondary housing market (Sahlin, 2006) is often used in Sweden to describe the activities that offer homeless people various forms of housing with social contracts. Sometimes the purpose is for the tenant to take over the contract in the first place after a probationary period. It usually refers to means-tested and publicly subsidised housing, which is not integrated into ordinary residential buildings, but is concentrated in special residential buildings intended for low-income households. Tenants receive real leases that are not limited in time, and today it is increasingly common for these homes to be scattered in various ordinary apartment buildings. In Sweden, there has long been political opposition to social housing, as it has been considered category housing, which risks reinforcing social exclusion. However, it happens that social services rent entire properties and then rent out housing to people experiencing homelessness with social contracts, which never have the opportunity of being taken over.

To deal with homelessness, the staircase model has been generally the most widely used tool, like in many other European countries. It started with the closure of the major psychiatric institutions in the early nineties. The health service referred people to the municipality and said they were medically finished and that it was now the municipality's responsibility to resolve their accommodation. What

happened then was that municipalities built up smaller institution like housing, which we know today as the staircase model. When the second national survey was launched in 1999, the Government appointed a homelessness commission. The figures were considered alarming and the first official homelessness work in Sweden started with a number of projects. The most interesting thing was that in the Homelessness Commission's final report in 2001, it says that Housing First is the best tool to solve homelessness!

It is the municipalities that, through social services, are responsible for the social homelessness work in Sweden. Social Services cooperates with municipal housing companies, private landlords, and non-profit organisations and companies. Many municipalities have a local system for homelessness (Wirehag, 2019) and run their own homeless activities, such as assisted living, group homes, and emergency housing (shelters), as well as eviction prevention, housing counselling, and, in some cases, day care for the homeless. It is also common for municipalities to buy services from, for example, private companies, NGOs, and other private organisations, which run various types of housing for people experiencing homelessness.

The first Housing First operations started in Sweden in 2010 and since then there have been several attempts to implement the model in Sweden. In 2019, there were Housing First operations in 21 municipalities, which included a total of 600 apartments. The larger operations are located in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, and Helsingborg. Several of the Swedish Housing First operations have been evaluated with promising results both in terms of retention levels and social integration. There are many housing-led initiatives, but without some key principles in Housing First, and it is estimated that there are around 37 000 different kinds of social rental contracts in Sweden.

People who are homeless are more severely affected by disease and ill health than other groups in society. There is an elevated mortality rate among people experiencing homelessness in comparison to other groups in society. Women experiencing homelessness are a particularly vulnerable group who are at risk of physical and sexual violence, among other things. In Sweden, homelessness is increasing among families with children. These families often have to move around between different temporary housing solutions, which risks having negative consequences for the children in terms of their schooling, mental, and physical health.

We are also seeing signs of a new housing market. In these instances, companies and individuals buy or rent houses and apartments that they then rent at higher rates and without legal consideration to households that fail to obtain housing by other means and that are rejected by the municipality's social services. An important trend in homelessness policy is the adoption of new municipal guide-

lines. This has been particularly evident in Gothenburg and Malmö. The new guidelines mean in these cities that the municipality makes a distinction between structurally and socially homeless.

People who are experiencing homelessness structurally are those people who have no needs other than lack of housing and who have become homeless due to absences in the housing and labour market. This is a group that has increased in number. People who are experiencing homelessness socially are judged to have other needs in addition to the lack of housing and special difficulties in obtaining housing. They are thus considered to belong to the target group of social services. The municipalities' new guidelines are based on the fact that those who are defined as structurally homeless are expected to solve their situation themselves, despite the fact that there is a shortage of cheap rental apartments and the newly produced apartments are too expensive for them. Since municipalities are legally responsible for ensuring that no one suffers distress, they conduct a so-called 'emergency test' that can result in structurally homeless households getting a roof over their heads for one night or at most a week. After that, the situation is reassessed. In practice, this can mean that a family with children is forced to live in overcrowded conditions with shared bathrooms and kitchens in emergency housing or hostels week after week or move between different similar accommodations. As these are new municipal guidelines, we do not have any research results yet, but an ongoing research project investigates the work with emergency testing of structurally homeless households in Skåne. One of the motives for the changed practice has been to motivate the homeless parents to seek housing more intensively and in all parts of the country. This has contributed to newly arrived refugees being forced to move to municipalities with a weak labour market. The consequences for the children experiencing homelessness are yet unknown.

Another worrying trend is an increased exclusion of immigrant households. The purpose of the Settlement Act was that newly arrived refugees should be given a good introduction and integration by being assigned to municipalities with a relatively good labour market that were obliged to arrange housing for them. But uncertainties in the law and reluctance in many municipalities have meant that designated new arrivals have often only been offered temporary housing of a low standard for a maximum of two years. After that, they are sent out into the regular housing market, where their 'merits' in the form of employment, education, Swedish-speaking, and previous housing references are mostly not at all sufficient for a first-hand contract.

## What can NGOs do in Homelessness Work

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Sweden has strong roots in social democracy and has been a robust welfare society that has taken care of socially excluded people, which means that there is a strong history in the municipalities of doing most of their social services in-house, so to speak. NGOs have therefore always been seen as a complement and not part of the solution.

Regardless of which government it is, City Missions has worked with poverty and homelessness. There are 10 local independent City Missions and Stockholm City Mission has been active since 1853. As recently as 2007, the umbrella organisation Swedish association of City Missions was formed. Throughout history, NGOs have performed some municipal social services such as shelters and mobile teams with simpler agreements. This has changed with the law on procurement, which was introduced in several social areas in Sweden in the mid-90s. This had the effect of the fact that many NGOs in Sweden have developed into hybrid organisations that not only work with fundraising but where they sell services as a business. Sweden has quite a huge proportion of procurement for school, elderly care, and social services compared to other Member States, and NGOs have a very small part of that private market, only around 3-4%.

An example of in-house action was when Stockholm's Stadsmission ran a five-year Housing First project in collaboration with the City of Stockholm, and when the project period was over, the City of Stockholm took over the project and now run Housing First on a permanent basis. Another example was when the City of Gothenburg cut the cooperation agreements Gothenburg City Mission had with eight out of 10 districts in Gothenburg as well as with public housing, which at the time were the largest Housing First businesses in Sweden, and instead they made a procurement where most of the apartments from the public housing went to the City of Gothenburg's own Housing First.

The Swedish Association of City Missions in Sweden have been doing a lot of advocacy on several social issues and especially homelessness. For more than a decade, with the help of annual homelessness reports, the issue of a national homelessness strategy has been pushed and punctured with several different proposals. There have been one-liners or key descriptions that we have deliberately and tirelessly put forward based on different themes. However, the focus has always been on the right to housing.

The Swedish Association of City Missions membership in FEANTSA has meant a lot, especially with the focus on Housing First. EPOCH has also already been of great importance and will play an important role both before, during, and after Sweden's presidency of the EU in 2023. The launch of the European Housing First

guide and the start of the European Housing First Hub was also an important event in Europe for the development and spreading of Housing First. The Swedish association of City Missions has been a partner in the Hub since the start. This gave the idea to develop a Swedish Housing First Hub, where they worked with the spreading of Housing First based on education, research, etc. in the same way as it has happened in the European Housing First Hub.

### **Swedish association of City missions also did a feasibility study “Housing first – from IF to HOW” in 2022.**

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On July 7, 2022, a Swedish homelessness strategy 2022-2026 finally came out, focusing on Housing first with a budget of four million euros per year.<sup>1</sup> The operational solution to homelessness in Sweden is for the most part a decentralised issue and the definitive responsibility and cost of doing so lies at municipal level. The cost of acquired housing in staircase-housing led / first models are closer to seven billion for the municipalities. However, other costs for municipal public initiatives such as other social services and health care are not included in it. Considering that there are 290 municipalities in Sweden, and the State grant of four million euros that becomes available for municipalities every year, it may sound like very little money to end homelessness, but maybe enough money to change the local homelessness systems towards housing-led strategies!

The four goals on which Sweden’s new homelessness strategy is based are:

1. Homelessness should be prevented;
2. No one should live or live on the street;
3. Housing First should be introduced nationally; and
4. The social perspective in community planning should be strengthened.

The Government has given the mission to fulfil the Swedish Strategy to the National health and welfare. They have created an expert group with key stakeholders from different sectors, including the national Municipality org, NGOs (City Mission), Universities, national public housing, and health. Some key issues around Housing First education, research, and system change toward Housing First would best be solved with partnership in the Swedish built Housing First Hub. It sounds simple but it takes a leap of faith!

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<sup>1</sup> National Homelessness Strategy 2022 – 2026 (regeringen.se).

Finally, we just want to say that homelessness research is extensive, but there are knowledge gaps and new ones are constantly being created. As homelessness is linked to the housing market, urbanisation, and globalisation, its causes and solutions are changing. It is also desirable that more interdisciplinary research projects should be started. One such area is to intertwine research on migration and homelessness, another area concerns an urban perspective where increased polarisation and ever higher thresholds to the regular housing market also involve an increased risk that more groups will suffer from homelessness or exclusion from the housing market. We also see a need for homelessness research from a child's perspective. At the same time as the Convention on the Rights of the Child has become law in Sweden, we see tendencies that more and more families with children are defined as structurally homeless and thus excluded from the social authorities' auxiliary apparatus and housing resources.

**› References**

Sahlin, I. (2006) Homelessness and the Secondary Housing Market. (Paper presented at the European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) conference in Ljubljana, 2-5 July 2006).

Wirehag, M. (2019) Counting and Mapping Local Homeless Service Systems in Sweden, *European Journal of Homelessness* 13(1) pp.159-180.