



**RESEARCH**

BRIEF

**#14**

**FORTE:**

Swedish Research Council for  
Health, Working Life and Welfare

# HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is an extensive social problem in Sweden → One significant cause is poverty, another is the housing shortage → Sweden has a higher proportion of homeless people compared with our neighbouring Nordic countries → There is a lack of control over how vacant housing is distributed among applicants for housing → The COVID-19 pandemic can lead to more people losing their housing



**Forte is a research council that funds and initiates research to support people's health, welfare and working lives.**

Research Brief is a series of publications from Forte that briefly describes the current state of knowledge in a socially relevant area. Each publication in the series is produced by a team of researchers and community representatives and is reviewed by a minimum of one external researcher.

**Title:** Homelessness

**Authors:** Marcus Knutagård, Senior Lecturer and Project Manager. School of Social Work, Lund University

Arne Kristiansen, Associate Professor of Social Work at the School of Social Work, Lund University

Kjell Larsson, Gothenburg's kyrkliga Stadsmission and the representative for Sweden in FEANTSA

Ingrid Sahlin, Senior Professor of Social Work at the School of Social Work, Lund University.

**Peer review:** Evelyn Dyb, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Welfare and Labour Research (SVA), Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR)

**Cover photo:** Eric Ward

Download this publication, including reference list, from:

[www.forte.se/en/publication/rb-homelessness](http://www.forte.se/en/publication/rb-homelessness)

#### **Research Briefs**

ISSN 2001-4287

No. 14/2020

Do you have questions or comments about this product? Call us on +46 8 775 40 70 or e-mail us at [forte@forte.se](mailto:forte@forte.se)

Published by Forte, Box 38084, 100 64 Stockholm

## SUMMARY

Homelessness is an extensive societal problem in Sweden, as in many other countries. The situation has worsened over the past 20 years. One significant cause is poverty, and another is the general housing shortage, in particular rental apartments with reasonable rents that enable people with a low income to enter the rental market. There is also a lack of control over how vacant housing is distributed among applicants for housing.

Sweden has a higher proportion of people experiencing homelessness per thousand inhabitants compared with our neighbouring Nordic countries. One partial explanation is the growth of the secondary housing market where half of the total number of homeless people in Sweden in April 2017 were to be found. However even disregarding the municipalities' subtenants, those on a "secondary contact" sublet, Sweden had more than twice as many homeless per thousand inhabitants as Norway.

One trend is that the proportion of women and the proportion of individuals with a foreign background is increasing. The number of children affected by homelessness is also growing. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only raised concerns about more people risking losing their housing, but also that the spread of infection may increase among people experiencing homelessness who are not in a position to follow the public authority's advice and recommendations.

# 1. Introduction

Homelessness is a huge societal problem in Sweden and many other countries. This overview of the current state of knowledge presents current research on the causes, extent, growth and consequences of homelessness, as well as discusses a number of problems and gaps in knowledge. The overview also describes various initiatives to prevent and counter homelessness, and what we know about their effects and longer-term impacts. The overview also points to current trends in the field of homelessness. Homelessness is due in part to the fact that the need for housing does not match the supply – in terms of location, size, rent level and the landlords' requirements imposed on the applicants. It is difficult to measure homelessness and compare over time or between countries, nevertheless researchers agree that the proportion of homeless people is higher in Sweden than in the neighbouring Nordic countries, and that this has increased over the past decade. There is no evidence that the “housing staircase model” and secondary rental contracts with municipalities will reduce homelessness in the long term. On the other hand, the “Housing First” model – where homeless people receive their own, independent stable housing and support as needed, is a successful – and a cost-effective – initiative. A significant and worrying trend is that the number of homeless families with children, often with foreign-born parents, is increasing in the Swedish metropolitan areas. What consequences this will have for the children is a very important issue, one that deserves future research.

## 2. Definitions

How we define homelessness has consequences for which groups of individuals are included and/or excluded, both in systematic surveys and in efforts to combat homelessness. Definitions are also related to how we view homelessness as a problem. Based on existing homelessness research three perspectives are crystallised (Pleace 2016; Bramley & Fitzpatrick 2018). One perspective looks at homelessness primarily as a problem of the individual, where the behaviour of individuals is seen as the cause of their homelessness. From this perspective, the individual's drug or alcohol abuse, poor mental health or a similar factor or situation comes into focus. Such an explanatory model that focuses on the individual has been criticised for pathologising homelessness and also risking that blame is placed on homeless people themselves for the situation which they find themselves in. Another perspective regards structural factors as the explanation for homelessness as a problem. This concerns primarily, for example, the shortage of available housing that homeless people can seek, or poverty and unemployment that makes it difficult to have

the means to be able to pay the rent. A third perspective regards homelessness as a complex and compounded problem consisting of an interaction of risk factors at four different levels – structural, institutional, relational and the individual level (Fitzpatrick 2005). The research points to the fact that things may look different for different groups of homeless people, with certain risk factors at different levels being more decisive than others.

It is difficult to measure homelessness and it is difficult to compare the number of homeless people both within the country and between different countries (Sahlin 1992; Busch-Geertsema, Culhane & Fitzpatrick 2016). This is because widely different definitions of homelessness are used and what is measured and which methods are used vary widely in scope, frequency, providers of information, and the period of time which the measurements have been conducted. In Denmark, for example, there are exceptionally good possibilities to use available administrative data. This is lacking in Sweden and there is a significant need for an improved tracking and monitoring of where people are placed, how long they live in different types of housing, and where they take off to. A project (COST) is working to study how homelessness can be measured in Europe. It should be noted that it looks very different between countries, and there is very limited data on the number of homeless people. Several “street counts” (a method used to calculate the homeless people sleeping rough for a given period in a city or in a defined area) have been implemented during the project period. The most recent homelessness survey in Sweden also shows that homelessness and the distribution between homelessness situations look different, in for example the three major cities (which in turn have different ways of defining and categorising homelessness).

Since 1993, the National Board of Health and Welfare has been conducting national structured surveys of homelessness every six years. The latest was conducted in 2017. During the measurement week 14, there were a total of 33,269 homeless people (National Board of Health and Welfare 2017), which very likely is an underestimation of the situation. Twenty percent of the country's social services administrations did not respond to the questionnaire, and the survey only includes adults who are the subject of some form of intervention or otherwise known by the social services, healthcare system, or non-profit organisations. In addition, several groups in the survey are excluded, such as undocumented persons, asylum seekers and vulnerable EU migrants. This means that many who are actually sleeping rough or in improvised accommodations, or staying temporarily in either substandard or unsafe forms of housing, are not included.

The definition of homelessness has changed between the different occasions measurements were made. This also makes it difficult to make comparisons over time.

### 3. Number of homeless people in different situations

According to the National Board of Health and Welfare's definition, individuals can be in one of four different "homelessness situations":

**(1) Acute homelessness.** At the latest survey in 2017, there were some 5,900 individuals in this situation, which was a greater number than in 2011. These include the people living in emergency housing, shelters, sheltered housing or similar housing. People who are sleeping rough or in improvised accommodations such as tents, stairwells or cars, are also included here. It is usually this group that appears in discussions about homelessness. 59 percent were men and 41 percent were women. Violence in close relationships was reported to be a contributing factor to the acute homelessness situation for one-third of the women. Some 40 percent of the homeless had children under 18 years old, and at least 500 of them (most of them women) lived with their minor children. 60 percent of the persons in acute homelessness were born outside Sweden.

**(2) Persons housed in an institution or in transitional housing with social support.** More than 4,900 persons were enrolled in one of a variety of different types of institutions (for example, a prison/penal institution, halfway house or other transitional housing with social support), without having any housing arranged prior to discharge three months after the measurement week. The ratio of men to women was 79 percent men to 21 percent women. In this homelessness situation, fewer individuals had children under age 18, and 76 percent were born in Sweden.

**(3) Long-term housing solutions.** The focus here is on individuals or households who are subtenants under a "secondary contract," i.e. a form of subletting under a special contract entailing that they are renting housing from the social services who has rented it as the primary tenant. This is usually referred to as the "secondary housing market". There were 15,838 adults, almost one-half of the total number of homeless people, with housing under this scheme. This system of rental contracts is unique to Sweden. The contracts are combined with supervision and special rules and requirements in addition to what applies in accordance with the Swedish Tenancy Act. The security of tenure has been negotiated away so the tenant can quickly lose his or her housing in the event of disturbing behaviour or if the rent is not paid. Of those in this homelessness situation in 2017, 43 percent were born in a country other than Sweden and 45 percent were women.

40 percent had children. More people had income from employment than in the other homelessness situations, even though one-half were receiving income support or another form of social welfare.

**(4) Short-term accommodations arranged on one's own.** This includes people who live temporarily with a family member, other relatives, friends or acquaintances without a contract or as a temporary room tenant/lodger on a secondary contract (maximum three months), with a private person. To be included here, the person would also have to have had contact with the social services or some other actor highlighting the housing situation as a problem. In 2017, 5,700 people were in this situation. Two-thirds were men and the average age was lower than in the other homelessness situations. One third of this group had minor children and 43 percent were born outside of Sweden.

Since the national surveys in Sweden are carried out during one single measurement week, there are a number of difficulties in making general conclusions about various different homelessness careers and the dynamics of homelessness. There is also a risk that information concerning individuals in certain groups will not be captured during the measurement week, since only those who have been in contact with the provider of information at that time are counted. Homeless women are often highlighted as a group that is invisible in these types of measurements.

In the survey conducted in 2017, we can see that more and more people are being stated as not having any problems other than that they lack their own housing. This applied to more than one-fifth of the homeless, and in a municipality like Malmö to the majority of those locally surveyed. The proportion of women has more than doubled since the first survey in 1993, from 17 percent to 38 percent. The proportion of individuals with a foreign background has increased from 23 percent in 1993 to 43 percent in 2017. The National Board of Health and Welfare estimates that at the last survey, at least 24,000 children were impacted by homelessness and additionally they are a group that is invisible in the secondary housing market, especially concerning evictions. The evictions that are implemented in the secondary housing market are not tracked by the Swedish Enforcement Authority.

Sweden has a higher proportion of homeless people per thousand inhabitants compared to our neighbouring Nordic countries (see Table 1.). Even if we remove from the statistics the homeless population that is in situation 3, within the secondary housing market, Sweden has more than twice as many homeless per thousand inhabitants compared with Norway (see Benjaminsen 2019; Dyb 2019; Dyb & Lid 2017).

**Table 1. Homelessness in the Nordic countries**

Country	Population	Homeless	Homeless per 1000 inhabitants
Sweden 2017	9 995 153	33 269	3,3 (1,7*)
Denmark 2019	5 806 769	6 431	1,1
Norway 2016	5 258 297	3 909	0,75
Finland 2017	5 503 297	7 112	1,3

\* Homeless per 1,000 inhabitants, excluding those individuals who are in the secondary housing market

One significant explanation for the differences in the share of homeless people between Sweden and the other Nordic countries is the degree of government involvement in housing supply and the role of municipal-owned housing and housing available via the municipal housing agency. Unlike in Norway and Denmark, marginalised groups are rarely given preference for municipal-owned housing in Sweden. The local Swedish homelessness policy has rested heavily on the housing staircase model's concept of a gradual qualification for a regular rental agreement, while the strategies used in Denmark and Norway place a greater emphasis on homeless individuals' need for normal housing with a regular rental agreement (Benjaminsen & Dyb 2008). In Finland, where homelessness has decreased most, Housing First is (see further below) part of the national homeless strategy, the Action Plan Against Homelessness.

## 4. Causes

Homelessness is an extensive societal problem in Sweden. One significant cause of homelessness is the shortage of housing, in particular rental apartments with reasonable rents that individuals with low incomes can pay. Of Sweden's 290 municipalities, 83 percent state that they have a shortage of housing (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning 2019). Homelessness has a high price, both in terms of human and socioeconomic costs, as it both generates and reinforces social exclusion and other societal problems (Arnold 2004; Knutagård 2009; Norman & Pauly 2013; Swärd 2008). Research has shown that poverty and especially child poverty creates a clear risk of homelessness and can be seen as the common denominator among people experiencing homelessness (Bramley & Fitzpatrick 2018; Knutagård 2019). The National Board of Health and Welfare's most recent systematic survey showed that almost half of all homeless people had income support or other form of social welfare, and only just under ten percent had

some form of income from employment (see also Knutagård 2019).

One contributing cause of homelessness in Sweden is the landlords' demands for a regular income, references, and queuing time. Another factor is that since 2011 the municipal housing companies are required by law to operate on a commercial basis and provide a profit (surplus) to their owners. The new Swedish Public Utility Municipal Housing Companies Act (*Lag om allmännyttiga kommunala bostadsaktiebolag*) was justified as an EU adaptation. However the necessity for this was already questioned while investigations were ongoing, and the interpretation of both EU principles as well as the municipalities' interpretation of the new legislation was later criticised (Kjellström 2015; Hettne 2020; Anefur 2014; Sahlin 2008, 2015). The municipal housing agencies allow property owners affiliated with the agency to set minimum requirements for new tenants, as long as the requirements do not constitute discrimination within the meaning of the law. In many municipalities, one has to wait several years in a housing queue to be considered at all for an apartment, which is particularly disadvantageous to new immigrants. It has also become common to maximise the number of individuals in a certain size of apartment, which makes it difficult for many families with children to obtain a rented accommodation.

However, additional available housing in the municipal-owned housing or housing available via the municipal housing agency does not automatically reduce homelessness. A study of the growth of homelessness in 1990-2000 showed that local homelessness increased most in the municipalities with a clear housing staircase model and a relatively large proportion of social services contracts, irrespective of the proportion of vacant apartments in the municipal housing agency. This can be interpreted as that the landlords would rather leave their housing units empty than lower the thresholds for new tenants (Sahlin 2007).

## 5. Initiatives to reduce homelessness

The shortage of housing is a serious challenge for the society. At the same time, social initiatives and efforts are needed for many people who are homeless. There are initiatives and efforts aimed at eliminating or minimising homelessness, as well as efforts aimed at alleviating the negative effects of homelessness on homeless people. It is the municipalities that are responsible for the social homelessness work in Sweden via the social services. The social services work together with municipal housing companies, individual landlords, non-profit organisations and companies owning property. Many municipalities conduct their own homelessness remediation activities, such as transitional housing with social support, group

housing and emergency accommodations (shelters) as well as efforts to prevent eviction, housing counselling and in some cases communality day care activities for homeless people. It is also not uncommon for municipalities to purchase services from, for example, commercial enterprises, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and sometimes even user-governed organisations, which operate different types of housing for homeless people.

### 5.1 The Housing Staircase Model and the Continuum of Care Model

A large part of the forms of housing for the homeless are based on the fact that they need to fulfil certain preconditions and rules and/or undergo treatment to manage their own housing. Therefore, a number of rules are set for the residents that they must comply with, such as zero tolerance for alcohol and drugs, no overnight guests or cohabitants, and inspection visits are made in the housing. Often, a kind of housing career is planned, where the homeless can advance from emergency housing to a furnished “corridor room” (SRO) and on to a sublet apartment with a special contract (a secondary contract to the original rental agreement). Although the goal of this “housing staircase model” is that the clients will, in time, be able to obtain their own housing with a rental agreement signed directly with the owner, there are quite a few who achieve this goal. Instead, they tend to get stuck or they move around between housing solutions that are both temporary and unsafe (Boverket 2012; Knutagård 2009; Hansen Löfstrand 2010; Sahlin 1996). However, research has shown that forms of housing such as shelters can fulfil functions other than leading to a rental contract. It can be a waiting room, to be used as a sanction, to regulate the demand for housing as well as to function as an end station (Sahlin 1996). Therefore, the municipalities continue to use shelters and hostels, even though the other steps in the staircase model are being expanded.

The housing staircase model may vary in form and content between different municipalities. The highest step in the housing staircase model is often apartments with social services contracts that are spread out in ordinary residential housing areas, but underneath this there are, for example, transitional housing with social support, category housing (special housing for the poor), group housing and shelters. What is meant in this context by “social services contract” (sociala kontrakt) are contracts secondary to the original rental agreement that are limited in time without security of tenure protection, which the social services offers to homeless people.

The “Continuum of Care” model is an alternative that may contain different types of treatments (Blid 2008). It can entail, for example, that a homeless person undergoes treatment for drug/alcohol abuse, and then, if all goes well, a secondary contract (sublet agreement) is offered with the municipality.

### 5.2 The secondary housing market and social housing

The term “the secondary housing market,” where social services rent housing from municipal or private parties and then sublet these apartments to their clients, is often used in Sweden to describe the social services activities that offer homeless people different forms of housing with social services contracts, that is, contracts secondary to the original rental agreement, on special terms and conditions (Sahlin 1996). In 2019, the secondary housing market consisted of 26,100 housing units, most of which were in properties owned by the municipal housing companies (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning 2019). Sometimes, but not always, the intention is for the tenant to take over the rental agreement signed directly with the owner after a trial period, which can vary between 6 and 24 months, and it is then assumed to be a solution to the housing problem. However, according to the latest figures from the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning in 2014 only 7.8 percent of these subletting tenants were allowed to take over their contract. Research also shows that homelessness, for example as measured by the number of individuals in acute homelessness, has instead increased over time in municipalities with a large proportion of social services contracts, independent of the proportion of vacant apartments.

This may be due to that landlords prefer subletting via the municipality rather than lowering their thresholds, while the concept of the housing staircase presupposes that there are lower “steps” for those who are not yet ready or no longer considered to be able to manage housing on their own (Sahlin 2007).

The term social housing usually refers to publicly subsidised housing, where the tenancy is based on a rental agreement with low-income households signed directly with the owner. In Sweden, for a long time there has been political opposition to social housing, which is associated with category housing (special housing for the poor), as it risks reinforcing social exclusion (Sahlin 2008; Hansen Löfstrand 2012; Grandner 2018). But today, such housing is often scattered in various apartment buildings, and it appears that the social services in Sweden also rents entire buildings and then rents out housing to homeless people with social services contracts, which thus can never be taken over as a tenant directly with the owner. The arguments against social housing have therefore not proved sustainable and are now being questioned to a greater extent (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning 2016a; City Mission 2019).

### 5.3 Housing first

In recent years, the Housing First model, which was developed in the United States in the early 1990s, has been met with great interest in the field of homelessness (Tsemberis 2010). The model starts out on the basis that one having their own stable housing is a basic human right and a prerequisite for social integration. The apartments

offered via Housing First are scattered in ordinary residential buildings. There are no other requirements imposed on the residents, who are often individuals who have been homeless for a long period of time and have extensive problems and needs for support, than what applies to other tenants. The same as with the regular housing market, they pay the rent themselves. They are offered voluntary flexible social support from professionals who will respond to them with respect, warmth and compassion. In Housing First, the importance of residents' self-determination rights and influence over how social support is to be designed and focused is emphasised. The social support should be provided as long as the resident considers that they need it and be focused on recovery and harm reduction (Nelson & MacLeod 2017; Tsemberis 2010; Pleace 2018).

A number of international studies have shown that Housing First is an effective way to counter long-term homelessness for people with alcohol/drug addiction issues and/or mental illness. The vast majority remain living in their housing for several years, and many studies have also shown that the quality of life and social integration of the residents is improved. According to several studies, Housing First is also a cost-effective method (Larimer et al. 2009; Pleace 2012). This is particularly interesting and relevant in comparison with the municipalities' ordinary housing for homeless people, outside the ordinary housing market, which is estimated to cost SEK 5.3 billion each year, of which SEK 1.8 billion relates to the secondary housing market (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning 2015, p. 6).

The first Housing First operations in Sweden commenced in 2010, and since then the model has been implemented in a number of municipalities. In 2019, it had operations in 21 Swedish municipalities, encompassing a total of 600 apartments. The larger operations are located in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö and Helsingborg. Several of the Swedish Housing First's activities have been evaluated with promising results both in terms of levels of housing retention and social integration (Kristiansen 2013; Uhnöo 2016; Folkesson 2017). In several other countries, Housing First is primarily part of a national strategy for homelessness, however in Sweden the model is an extremely limited part (Knutagård 2015; Sahlin 2017; Pleace, Baptista & Knutagård 2019).

#### 5.4 Land use agreements, rental policies and relocation chains

The municipalities can, by means of land use agreements with residential developers and builders, specify preconditions for housing construction at a particular location. Such conditions can also apply to social issues and thus municipalities can influence the residential developers to build, for example, rental apartments with reasonable rents or to allocate part of the stock of housing units to socially vulnerable groups. However, this type of land utilisation

agreement is still uncommon (SOU 2018:35, National Board of Housing, Building and Planning 2018; Hansson & Sigmo 2019). Housing companies and other property owners determine in their rental policy who may be considered as becoming their tenants. The municipalities can determine this in the owner's instructions for the housing companies they own. According to the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (2019), less than one in three municipalities have tried to counter homelessness via reduced requirements being placed on housing applicants.

Relocation chains, meaning the chain effect that arises when a household moves to a new residence and releases their former housing to another household, has been highlighted as an opportunity to open up the housing market for low-income groups. Studies have shown however that this is not occurring, but rather that other and more targeted measures are needed to make the housing market more accessible to low-income groups (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning 2016b; Rasmusson, Salonen & Grandér 2018).

#### 5.5 Structured housing queues

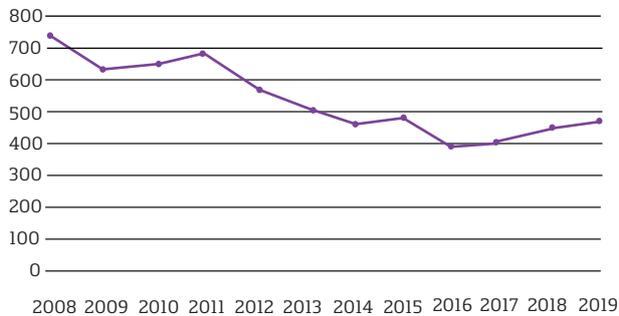
Up until 1993, when both the Swedish Act on Municipal Responsibility for Housing Provision and the Swedish Allocation of Housing Act ceased to be in effect, municipalities with housing shortages often ran municipally-operated housing agencies, where the placement in the queue could be influenced by certain factors, for instance social and medical needs. This led to a possibility to distribute vacant housing to those in greatest need; in this way a homeless family with children could be prioritised before a young person who had a good living situation in their parents' home. Today, very few municipalities have such services.

#### 5.6 Prevention of eviction and other preventive measures

In half of Sweden's municipalities, eviction prevention measures are used, usually in local joint collaboration between landlords and social services, and sometimes with other parties such as the Swedish Enforcement Authority and NGOs. If this is done systematically and continuously, it can produce good results and reduce the number of evictions (National Board of Health and Welfare 2017; Stenberg et al. 2011). However, the number of evictions that affect children has nevertheless increased in recent years (see Figure 1.). According to the Swedish Enforcement Authority (2019), 84 percent of the evictions due to rental debts that are implemented affect children. In almost 39 percent of cases, the eviction is for unpaid rent obligations less than SEK 10,000. The average rental debt is SEK 24,500. Only a minor proportion of all evictions are captured by the Swedish Enforcement Authority's statistics (Kjellbom 2014). Notices of termination via the decision of a regional rent and tenancies tribunal (Hyresnämnd) and by contracts secondary to the original rental agreement – not least the social services – are not included, nor are

the cases where the tenant who's rental agreement has been terminated moves without the need for the Swedish Enforcement Authority to be become involved.

**Figure 1. Number of children affected by evictions, 2008-2009**



Source: <https://www.kronofogden.se/statistikvrakning.html>

## 6. Homeless, health and especially vulnerable groups

On average, individuals who are experiencing homelessness are more severely affected by illness and ill health than other groups in society (National Board of Health and Welfare 2017). Particularly those living in shelters have an increased mortality (Beijer 2009; Irestig et al. 2008; Nielsen et al. 2011; Webb et al. 2018). Homeless women are a particularly vulnerable group that is at risk of being subjected to physical and sexual violence (Beijer 2009; Walsh, Rutherford & Kuzmak 2009; Pleace 2016). In Sweden, homelessness is increasing, especially among foreign-born families with children. These families often have to move between different temporary housing solutions, which can have a negative impact on their children's schooling, and mental and physical health (Andersson & Swärd 2007; Knutagård 2012; Björkhagen 2019; Nordfeldt 2012; Shanker-Brown 2009).

## 7. Current trends

There have been significant changes in the housing market and housing policy over the past fifteen years. The availability of municipal-owned housing and housing available via the municipal housing agency is shrinking, and the proportion of owner-occupied housing and their prices are increasing. Significantly more rental housing has been built over the past decade, however the introduction of presumption rents (based in part on the costs to construct the new build-

ing) means that the new housing is rarely affordable for those in the situation with or at risk of homelessness.

A new, "illegal" housing market is emerging where companies and individuals purchase or rent houses and apartments, which they then rent out at exorbitant rents and for unlawful payment amounts to households that are unable to obtain housing in any other way and who have been rejected by the municipal social services (see Lind & Blomé 2012; Tingne 2018).

One significant trend in the homelessness policy is illustrated by new municipal guidelines that limit the right to housing assistance. In the spring of 2019, in Gothenburg and Malmö, a distinction was made between structurally homeless and socially homeless. "Structurally homeless" is those individuals who have no other unmet need than housing and who have become homeless due to a shortage of housing in the housing market and/or the labour market having nothing to offer them. This is a group that has increased in number; many homeless families with children with a foreign background fall into this category. Only the "socially homeless," who also have other needs and problems in addition to their lack of housing and special difficulties in obtaining housing are considered to belong to the social services target group. According to these new guidelines, structurally homeless people are expected to resolve their situation themselves, irrespective of the shortage of apartments for rent at a reasonable rent and that their applications for tenancy have not been approved by the landlords. Due to that the municipalities have the ultimate responsibility that nobody suffers from distress, the social services makes a "distress test" that can lead to that structurally homeless households get a roof over their heads for one night or for a maximum of one week. After this, the situation is then reassessed (Malmö City 2019; Gothenburg City 2019). In both of these cities, it is not the least families of foreign origin with children who are defined as structurally homeless. In practice, the new guidelines may mean that such families with children are forced, week after week, to stay crowded with shared washrooms and kitchens in emergency accommodations or hostels, or move between various such accommodations. Thus, in the terminology of the housing staircase model, they are never granted anything but a place on the lower housing staircase. In an ongoing research project, work on distress testing of structurally homeless households is being investigated in Skåne, and in a forthcoming doctoral dissertation a number of homeless single mothers in the same situation have been followed in Stockholm (Samzelius, forthcoming). One of the motives for the changed practice has been to motivate the homeless parents to more intensively seek housing, in all parts of the country. This has contributed to the fact that newly arrived refugees have been forced to move to municipalities with a weak labour market. The consequences for the children of the homeless are still unknown.

Another worrying trend is an increased exclusion of immigrant households (Andersson 2016). The purpose

of the Swedish Act on the Reception of Certain Newly Arrived Immigrants for Residence (Lag om mottagande av vissa nyanlända invandrare för bosättning), which came into effect in the spring of 2016, was to give newly arrived refugees a decent introduction and integration via being assigned to municipalities with a relatively strong labour market, which were obligated to arrange housing for them (Prop. 2015/16:54). However ambiguities in the statute and reluctance in many municipalities have meant that the new arrivals were often offered only temporary housing of a low standard and for a maximum of two years. After that they are sent out to the regular housing market, where their “qualifications” in the form of employment, education, Swedish language capability and references from previous housing are usually not at all sufficient for direct tenancy, i.e. a rental agreement signed directly with the owner.

At the time of writing, a major crisis is underway regarding the spread of a new coronavirus. A common strategy to minimise the spread of infection is social distancing and improved hand hygiene, however this is very difficult to maintain for individuals who lack their own housing and who are often forced to live with others and share kitchens and bathrooms with them. Particularly homeless people with addictions often have other underlying illnesses, placing them in the risk group for serious consequences if they become infected.

Due to social distancing and the fact that families must stay at home, violence in close relationships may increase, which in turn may lead to increased homelessness for women. For most people, a home is a place where we can feel safe and secure and socialise with loved ones. It is a place where we can close the door and have control over who can come and visit; however for some people, their “home” is a prison (Padgett 2007; Thörn 2004).

## 8. Gaps in knowledge

Homelessness research is extensive, however there are gaps in knowledge and new ones are constantly emerging. It is still difficult to obtain information on the number of homeless people and their housing situations that are reliable and comparable over time and between cities and countries.

In Sweden, homelessness policy is decided, and paid for, locally, which contributes to the differences between different cities and municipalities.

This also means that the research needs to use many different methods and data and be conducted in many different places. Due to that homelessness is linked to the housing market, urbanisation and globalisation, its causes and solutions are constantly changing.

It would be desirable to have more interdisciplinary research projects concerning homelessness. One relevant

such area is to merge research on migration and homelessness. Another is to apply an urban perspective since sharp polarisation and ever-increasing thresholds for the ordinary housing market also increase the risk of more groups being excluded from the housing market.

In addition, we see a need for homelessness research also from the children’s perspective. At the same time as the Convention on the Rights of the Child has become law in Sweden, we see a tendency for more and more families with children to be defined as structurally homeless and thereby excluded from the social welfare authorities’ assistance apparatus and housing resources. It would have been very useful to investigate how the individuals who have been rejected by the social services solve their housing situation in the short-term and over the long-term, and what role private landlords and others such as real estate companies play in the social housing market.

It would also be useful to study the costs of homelessness in relation to the outcome of various interventions. Finally, more longitudinal studies are needed that illuminate different groups’ ways out of homelessness with a special focus on differences and similarities between men and women, and between Swedish-born and immigrant individuals.