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Article

Contradictions Within the Swedish Welfare System: Social Services' Homelessness Strategies Under Housing Inequality

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Abstract
Sweden has seen a rise in homelessness alongside its strained housing market. References are increasingly being made to structural problems with housing provision, rather than individual issues. Housing has been organized through the local social services, which are responsible for supporting homeless people. With a foundation in housing studies, this article analyzes the Swedish social services' challenges and actions in a time in which affordable housing is in shortage, and housing inequality a reality, through the lens of social services. The focus is on the intersection between the regular housing market and housing provision (primary welfare system), the social services needs-tested support (secondary welfare system), and the non-profit and for-profit organizations (tertiary welfare system), with emphasis on the first two. The article is based on interviews with people working for the City of Malmö and illustrates how the housing shortage problem is moved around within the welfare system whilst also showing that social services' support for homeless individuals appears insufficient. Social services act as a "first line" gatekeeper for those who have been excluded from the regular housing market. Moreover, recently implemented restrictions aim to make sure that the social services do not act as a "housing agency," resulting in further exclusion from the housing market. The article highlights how the policies of the two welfare systems interact with and counteract each other and finally illustrates how homeless individuals fall between them. It highlights the need to link housing and homelessness in both research and practice to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of housing markets and how homelessness is sustained.

Keywords
homelessness policy; housing inequality; housing provision; social services; Sweden; welfare systems

Issue
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1. Introduction

The increase in reported homelessness in Sweden and Europe (FEANTSA, 2018; National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017) raises questions about the housing market on the whole. The latest nationwide survey on homelessness, from 2017, reported over 33,250 people (of a population of 10 million at the time) as homeless in Sweden, compared to 17,800 in 2005 (of a population of 9 million; see Knutagård, 2018; National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017). Thus, at the time of the latest survey, Sweden had the highest share of homeless people per 1,000 inhabitants of the Nordic countries (Knutagård, 2018). In a "universal" welfare system, homelessness must be regarded as a serious failure. Since the 1990s, Swedish housing policy has increasingly become more market-oriented, with less government involvement in housing policies as a result. This has also entailed a "downgrade" of the issue of homelessness; rather than a national housing problem, it is treated as a responsib-

ility of the local social service authorities, distinct from the production and distribution of housing (Olsson & Nordfeldt, 2008; Sahlin, 2013).

International homelessness research from the 1980s onwards recognizes a complex relationship between individual circumstances and structural conditions that brings on precarious housing situations. Structural aspects include a lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and increased gaps in income and wealth, and individual circumstances include personal vulnerabilities, institutional experiences, and inadequate support (Lee et al., 2010; O'Flaherty, 2004). Homelessness rates tend to be higher in metropolitan areas where affordable units are scarce (Lee et al., 2010). Contexts like the housing market need to be addressed to further the theoretical development of homelessness research (Pleace, 2016). Quigley et al. (2001, p. 38) argue that the "tendency to downplay housing availability as an explanation for homelessness appears to be justified by the traits of the homeless population," that is, people are often described in terms of their social problems (e.g., drug abuse and mental health). While taking individual situations and misfortunes into account is certainly important for understanding potential causes of homelessness, this article focuses on the housing market to understand homelessness in Sweden. Here, homelessness is understood as a structural problem rooted in the political economy: "too many poor people competing for too few low-income housing units" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 514), adding to research pointing at homelessness as an existing housing emergency (Culhane & Metraux, 2008). The complexity of homelessness is often analyzed on an individual level (Somerville, 2013); there is thus less focus on the various structural shortcomings.

Swedish research on homelessness has increased since the 1990s. Contemporary researchers (Anderberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Knutagård, 2009; Löfstrand, 2005; Nordfeldt & Olsson, 2006; Sahlin, 1996; Samzelius, 2020; Swärd, 2021; Wirehag, 2022) have explored how homelessness is defined, how homelessness may be mapped, reasons for homelessness, consequences of homelessness (including health issues), and measures to reduce homelessness (Swärd, 2021). Homelessness scholars have also criticized that the underlying structural problem of the shortage of affordable housing has remained unaddressed (Löfstrand, 2005; Wirehag, 2022). Housing researchers focus to a larger extent than homelessness researchers on structural aspects and transformations in housing policy, such as, for example, an increased threat of displacement (Baeten et al., 2017; Pull, 2020), precarious housing conditions (Listerborn, 2021), and a lack of affordable housing (Grander, 2018). By bringing homelessness and housing research together, this article aims to illustrate the shortcomings of institutional separations of housing, particularly for people impacted negatively by the shortage of affordable housing in an unequal housing market. With a foundation in housing studies, this article analyzes the Swedish social services' challenges and actions in a time of housing inequality and a shortage of affordable housing; in such times, there is pressure on the social services (the secondary level of the welfare state) to act on the lack of response from the general housing provision (the primary level of the welfare state). This article brings new knowledge about—and understanding of—the ambiguous situation in social services concerning the negotiation of their role in the context of acute homelessness.

The article focuses on local responses to increased homelessness that are organized through social services to cope with the effects of the situation on the Swedish housing market. It presents results from a study conducted in Malmö, Sweden's third largest city, and is based on interviews with professionals from the municipal social service authorities. Homelessness policies are local and varied, and the experiences from Malmö do not apply to all Swedish municipalities; however, municipalities tend to follow each other and exhibit certain similarities (Wirehag, 2022). In 2005, 50 percent of the homeless individuals reported in Sweden were in large cities; in 2017, that number had decreased to around 30 percent (Wirehag, 2019). Housing shortages are prevalent in most Swedish cities today. 204 of 290 municipalities reported a shortage of housing in a survey from 2022 (National Board of Housing Building and Planning, 2022a).

The article's analytical framework consists of two integrated elements: (a) the different levels of the welfare system and (b) homelessness categories. The systemic and institutional levels are expressed in this article through the regular housing market and the primary welfare system. The individualization of homelessness is visible in the secondary and tertiary welfare systems. In the secondary welfare system, social services support the homeless and are, as expressed by an informant, a "first line" of sorts in confronting the housing shortage–the initial screening point beyond which support may be accessed. The tertiary welfare system allocates help for those who are most marginalized in the form of services and shelters, particularly emergency services, which are often provided by traditional charitable providers (O'Sullivan, 2010; Olsson & Nordfeldt, 2008) but are increasingly being run by for-profit organizations (Wirehag, 2022). The primary and secondary systems are the focus of this analysis. Within the municipality of Malmö, homelessness is often described as either structural (systemic housing situation) or social (individually induced; see, e.g., Malmö stad, 2020a). Categorizations in this article are used as indicators of how homelessness is understood, and they can lead to different measures and support for the homeless. There is a long tradition of distinguishing between the individual and the structural in sociology; for instance, Mills (1959, p. 8) distinguishes between "the personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure." This distinction plays a crucial role in how homelessness has been researched and dealt with in practice (Cronley, 2010).

In the following sections, we further introduce the context and the connected analytic framework of housing, homelessness, and welfare, before introducing the case study method. The analysis illustrates (a) how the categorization of homeless people functions as a tool and a prerequisite for assessments and decision-making, (b) the contradictions between the primary and secondary welfare systems as housing provision issues are being pushed down to the social services, and (c) how this leads to the latest "solution" for the complex situation. The analysis aims to answer the question: How do social services handle the slightly changed profile of homelessness and the increased number of homeless individuals in relation to the social workers' professional roles and assignments?

2. Housing and Homelessness in the Swedish Welfare System

Increasing housing costs, lagging income rates, the dismantling of welfare systems, and the unequal housing market trigger specific challenges, and many households experience difficulty entering the regular housing market. Housing market inequalities are recognized internationally (James et al., 2022) as well as in Sweden (Listerborn, 2021). Inequalities create ambiguities and contradictions in welfare practices. Based on a long-term global engagement with housing issues as a UN special rapporteur, Rolnik (2019, p. 19) concludes:

> In general terms, there is a move to dismantle social and public housing policies, destabilise security of tenure—including rental arrangements—and convert the home into a financial asset. However, this process is path-dependent: The institutional scenarios inherited by each country are fundamental for the construction of the emergent neoliberal strategies. Neoliberal policies must be understood as an amalgam between these two moments: it is a process of partial destruction of what exists and of trend creation of new structures.

Sweden and the Nordic countries are often described as social democratic regimes, where the welfare state has a substantial redistributive role with generous social welfare and unemployment benefits independent of market and familial reliance (Esping-Andersen, 1990; O'Sullivan, 2010). In a more recent debate, however, Baeten et al. (2015, p. 209) describe the Nordic countries as "post-welfare states" that have lost their status as distinct models:

> [The] post-welfare state does not mean the end of the welfare state but decentralization of welfare provision to lower government echelons (cities and regions, placing increasing pressure and financial burden on cities which Peck 2012 has coined as "austerity urbanism") and to the private market.

The transformation of the Nordic welfare states began later than in other Western countries (Larsson et al., 2012), yet when it comes to housing, Sweden's entry into market logic was rapid. While Sweden remains a welfare society in many ways and housing is regulated with considerable rights for tenants, the neoliberal transformation of the housing market stands out in relation to other welfare sectors. Additionally, the housing market has played a crucial role in growing inequalities (Hedin et al., 2012). Normative principles of the housing regime being universal may still play a central role in authorities' understanding of welfare "needs" and influence local authorities' actions. However, the state's role has changed, and its actions align more with market principles (Baeten et al., 2015).

Every welfare system has its own boundaries and rules for inclusion and exclusion. In Sweden, the welfare system is connected to employment and earned (previous) income, and it is managed by a national insurance system organized by public and government authorities, the aim being to ensure equality between citizens. Olsson and Nordfeldt (2008) describe this as a primary, long-term, structural welfare system. The primary welfare system is universal and built on the idea of a redistributive state. Subsequently, the Swedish housing regime has aimed to be universal with a general approach, supported by market correctives from the state; ideally, everyone should be able to find housing on the same regular market (Bengtsson, 2001). Formally, municipalities are responsible for organizing housing provisions through the Municipalities' Housing Provision Act (Ministry of Finance, 2000). The Swedish Constitution contains a formulation of housing as a right (Ministry of Justice, 1974, Chapter 1, § 2), but does not imply an independent, legally enforceable right (Lind, 2009). However, some groups—disabled, elderly, asylum seekers, and newly-arrived immigrants—may be legally entitled to housing (National Board of Housing Building and Planning, 2020b). Homeless individuals may also be entitled to housing support.

In line with the principles described above, Sweden does not have a needs-tested housing sector for low-income households. Instead, public housing, organized as municipal housing companies (MHCs) that act in the same market as private rental companies, have been responsible for supplying affordable housing. However, qualifications such as a minimum income level or not being a recipient of social benefits are often a prerequisite for becoming a tenant (Grander, 2017). Allocation of dwellings is usually based on waiting time in a local queue system, which (as in Malmö) may also comprise private housing companies. New legislation from 2011 requires that the MHCs must act according to "business-like principles." This reform enabled an overall rent increase and created prospects for renovations, and MHCs became more inclined to sell their housing stock to finance housing production and renovations (Grander, 2018; Gustafsson, 2021).

The secondary welfare system deals with local, individual, and social problems, including homelessness (Olsson & Nordfeldt, 2008). The Social Services Act (Department of Social Affairs, 2001) states that individuals have the right to needs-tested support to achieve "reasonable living conditions," e.g., financial support or housing. Hence, this act does not imply a general responsibility to provide housing, either (Lind, 2009). The Supreme Administrative Court has found that "individuals have a right to support in terms of housing that fulfills the requirements for reasonable living conditions if they are *completely homeless* and have *special difficulties of organizing housing on their own*" (Holappa, 2018, p. 201, authors' translation, original italics). Until 2022, there was no national homelessness policy in Sweden, and interpretations of the law and case law, as well as the housing solutions used, varies between the municipalities (Sahlin, 2020; Wirehag, 2019, 2021). For example, housing is provided through shelters, hostels, and longer-term "special leases." The lattermost are usually apartments on the regular housing market for which the municipalities hold a first-hand lease. Municipalities sublet these to homeless households without the security of tenure and sometimes with additional regulations (National Board of Housing Building and Planning, 2022b; Wirehag, 2021). There has been a dramatic national increase in special leases (also called "social contracts") of 177 percent from 2008 until 2019, when it peaked with a total of 26,087 leases (see National Board of Housing Building and Planning, 2019a, 2019b). Today, they equal 1.7 percent of the Swedish rental market (National Board of Housing Building and Planning, 2022b).

Homelessness has quantitatively increased, and its profile has also changed (Anderberg & Dahlberg, 2019; Knutagård, 2018). Poverty and the shortage of affordable rental housing are two central factors behind homelessness today. In the 2017 homelessness survey, more than a fifth of all homeless in Sweden were declared as having no support needs other than lacking housing. Many receive income in the form of social benefits, and a few are gainfully employed (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2017). Knutagård (2018, p. 111) highlights that, in the survey from 2017, "the most common reason why parents were homeless was that they didn't have an income that would qualify them as tenants on the ordinary housing market." Further, homelessness has increased in groups like young people, children, and families with a migration background. The development corresponds with emerging trends in other European countries (FEANTSA & Foundation Abbé Pierre, 2020; Knutagård, 2018). This article primarily analyzes the relationship between the primary and the secondary welfare systems and the reworking and erosion of both the provision of affordable housing and the secondary welfare system from the perspective of social services. For individuals with urgent housing needs, the social worker within the secondary welfare system is a "first line," granting access to support. As noted, there is also a tertiary welfare sector that may support those who are completely excluded.

The theoretical and empirical contributions of this article illuminate how the social services negotiate the increasingly market-oriented housing system and how their professional role is affected by the relationships between housing policies and the local social services' mandates and missions in a "post-welfare" situation. Before introducing the results from the research, the context of the case and the methodological approach will be presented.

3. Methods and the Case of Malmö

Malmö suffered both economic and population decline with the closure of the city's shipyard and textile industries in the late 1980s. Nonetheless, the population is now seeing rapid growth, with figures that far exceed former levels: In 2021 the city's population was 351,749 (Statistics Sweden, 2022). Socioeconomic segregation in the city is significant, however (Salonen et al., 2019). According to calculations by the National Board of Housing Building and Planning (2020a, p. 28, authors' translation), the share of households with a "strained housing economy" is higher in the Malmö region than in Sweden's two larger cities—Stockholm and Gothenburg—as well as in the country as a whole. Malmö stands out among the three cities when it comes to the profile of the homeless: In 2017, more women, young people, and people with children were homeless. Almost a third of the homeless population was described as having "no other problem than the lack of housing," compared to 9 and 17 percent in Stockholm and Gothenburg, respectively (Knutagård, 2018, p. 114).

When the interviews for this study were conducted in 2019, homelessness in Malmö had increased drastically according to the most recent local survey at the time, the 2018 municipal homelessness survey (Malmö stad, 2019a). Between 2009 and 2018, the number of homeless adults increased from 863 to 1,959 persons. According to the social services, the character of homelessness had also changed. Despite the population increase in Malmö, social homelessness had been relatively stable, whereas structural homelessness had increased from 329 to 1,337 adults. There were 1,347 children in homeless households in 2018, and 97 percent of the parents were structurally homeless. Moreover, 57 percent of all homeless adults were citizens of other countries than Sweden, a share that had increased. The main increase in this group was amongst people who had been in Sweden for less than three years. These statistics do not include those living in long-term housing solutions (i.e., special leases), which would have added over 1,500 adults and 500 children. The municipality had 1,460 dwellings with special leases in 2018, a doubling since 2005.

The study presented in this article comprises interviews with a total of nine persons working for the City of

Malmö in 2019. Six of them represent different positions within the Labour Market and Social Service Department (i.e., the social services); one was in the department direction and the rest worked in the social service as unit managers, officials, and social workers. Of the remaining informants, two represent the City Executive Office and one represents the Real Estate and Streets and Parks Department. Informants were asked to explain how the organization works in practice, as well as how they reason and act. In this article, we primarily draw on interviews with the social services, and only they are cited. These interviews also explored how these professionals understood the increased and slightly changed homelessness and categorizations of homelessness, as well as special leases and the increase thereof. The responsibility for structural homelessness and the growing "sub-system'' of special leases for this group were in focus in the interviews. The semi-structured interviews lasted around one hour each. The interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and subsequently transcribed, and themes were identified by reading and going back and forth in the material. The quotes used were translated from Swedish to English by the authors and the informants approved of the quotes used. To provide a high degree of anonymity, informants are described by their workplaces and roles, and the quotes are not linked to specific individuals. In addition to the interview material, documents and press articles are included to complement and add context to the recent development of the local social services' practice in relation to housing.

Housing support for the structurally homeless changed shortly after the interviews were conducted, and this article also includes the process that has taken place since the interviews. A stricter policy advocating short-term instead of long-term solutions was implemented in 2019 (Malmö stad, 2019b). According to the local homelessness survey published the following year, the total number of homeless persons decreased and the structurally homeless decreased by approximately half (Malmö stad, 2020a). The interviews thus revolve around the earlier situation of homelessness, as well as the practice of using special leases more generously for those defined as structurally homeless.

4. Social Services and Responsibilities for Structural Homelessness

As previous research has shown, the social services' practice of categorizing homeless individuals is a prerequisite for determining the support they will receive, and it is common both in the study of homelessness and when conducting social work practice (Sahlin, 2020; see also Knutagård, 2009; Löfstrand, 2005; Sahlin, 1996). Categorizations constitute one part of what Wirehag (2021) calls the "gatekeeping" function of social services, assessing who is eligible for and deserves support. In this section, we discuss the categorization of homelessness, which is understood as either social or structural, depending on its perceived cause as defined by the municipality. The distinction between these categories is closely connected to informants' discussions about the social services' role and responsibilities, as well as the relationship between the primary welfare system and the regular housing market on one hand, and the secondary welfare system and the social services on the other.

Whilst some informants found distinguishing between social and structural homelessness relatively easy, some also reflected on risks, such as difficulties finding common definitions within the organization and the possibility that they were simplifying clients' situations. Categorizing implies simplifications, and the distinction between the categories may not always be very clear in reality. Although research sometimes separates individual and structural causes, the two are rarely seen as actually unrelated (Sahlin, 2020; see also Fitzpatrick, 2005).

In the following quote, an informant explains the difference between the categories and indicates an understanding of homelessness as a housing market problem:

> [If] you for instance have some kind of addiction or mental illness or hopeless debts that make you eventually unable to find a solution on the open housing market…then you are not structurally homeless. But if, for example, the only reason you are turning to social services is because there is a shortage of housing in the city or the country, then you have no other difficulties; rather, it is really because not enough [housing] is being built. (Informant 5)

Behind these categorizations there is the prevalent problem of housing inequality. A municipal report on housing provision in Malmö concludes that the "competition for housing with affordable rent levels makes it very difficult for those with the lowest incomes, on social benefits, or with records of non-payment to enter the regular housing market" (Malmö stad, 2020b, p. 2, authors' translation). Our informants underlined high rents, especially in newly built housing, and landlords' strict requirements as significant issues and explanations for (structural) homelessness. One described the situation thus:

> I mean, in a way, they [the landlords] own our job and us as inhabitants of Malmö. So, they can say, "Yes, but you need to have four times the rent [in income]."…It has become more expensive and there are new, other, requirements; it has become, like, more strict. (Informant 5)

For the MHCs, Grander (2017) shows how increased market adaptation has led to stricter requirements and hence higher thresholds for new tenants. The requirements include affluent tenants whilst excluding others, who are referred to the social services and their special leases to gain access (Grander, 2017). Apart from a housing market that is inaccessible to many due to

limited economic resources, the above quote also illustrates the relationship between the regular market and the social services. Exclusion from the primary welfare system requires the secondary welfare system and social services to step in.

Furthermore, the housing queue system, which differs between cities, can be difficult to decipher, and in 2020 the average waiting time in Malmö was just over three years (Boplats Syd, 2020). In the interviews, the lack of accumulated time in the housing queue was emphasized as a problem among those seeking support from social services.

In line with previous research (Knutagård et al., 2020; Sahlin, 2020), the informants reported that refugees constitute a significant part of the structurally homeless. While this group may be heterogeneous, common factors may be a lack of accumulated time in the housing queue, a lack of social networks, and as expressed by Informant 3, insufficient knowledge of the housing system:

> So, of course, it is often they [refugees] who do not have knowledge of how the system works. Because people who have lived here their whole lives usually also know about Boplats Syd [the local housing queue] and all of that and hence have an advantage. (Informant 3)

Some informants mentioned young people, who sometimes lack a strong position in this context (see also Grander, 2023).

When the informants were asked about the situations leading up to seeking support from social services, some described what may be summarized as a housing precariat (Listerborn, 2021), including people with insecure housing conditions such as lodging or living with relatives. The informants were aware that lacking secure housing could happen to almost anyone, as such is the nature of life. One such event, or "trigger" (Anderberg & Dahlberg, 2019), is (marital) separations:

> It can also be just coincidences in life that do it, that you face a divorce or separate from your partner and only the other [person] has been on the lease, and "now here I am"—and you may have not had any problems before. (Informant 1)

The interviews with the informants from the social services indicated a discrepancy and negotiation between their understanding of their core mission (i.e., working with social problems) and the reality, which in their experience is also having to deal with the housing system's structural faults. According to some informants, the structurally homeless group should be able to have accommodation of their own. One expressed it as follows:

> So, if we had 200 apartments here tomorrow, half of our clients would have been able to move in and live there without problems. But since [the apartments] do not exist, it is referred to the social services that become the ultimate, the municipality's ultimate responsibility. (Informant 5)

This highlights that the support of the utmost safety net also comprises households with (mainly) poor economies. Another informant reflected on a complex relationship between reality and the law (Social Services Act), and the role of social services:

> This is where social policy and housing policy are very much out of sync. Because our legislation is from the early 80s and is based on us helping the most socially vulnerable. And if you have an income but no housing, are you then among the most socially vulnerable? Are those the people that we shall help? Yes, everyone should have a roof over their head. That is what we lean towards when we help them. But the question is whether it is right nonetheless, because one could say that social policy bears the consequences of housing policy. (Informant 2)

The situation in the housing market today is quite different from what it was in the 1980s when the Swedish housing market was balanced and there was even a surplus of rental apartments, including in the major cities. In general, given the situation, our informants did not question that support with housing should be provided, but some reflected on how and by whom it should be organized.

Sahlin (2020, p. 39) describes how an interviewee in her research in Malmö explained that the concept of structural homelessness was initially a way for social services to "highlight that shortage of housing was a significant cause of homelessness, which must be addressed at the national level or by the city as a whole." Similarly, one of our informants explained that the epithet could be seen as a signal to the market, stressing a discrepancy between what the market supplies and the factual housing needs.

Whilst there sometimes appears to be a gap between housing and social work research, the interviews indicate that the gap also exists in practice, between housing and social policy—and the two welfare systems—that make the social services meet the consequences of housing inequalities. The coming sections will discuss the *actual* consequences of the unequal housing market and the unclear responsibilities that ultimately hit the homeless.

5. Dealing With Structural Issues at the "First Line"

Housing policy affects the homeless, and it also has an impact on social services. The effects of the primary welfare system and the regular housing market's shortcomings trickle down to the secondary and the local social service authorities. The interviews indicate that the local organization related to housing had grown and become more formalized as homelessness and special leases had increased.

The 2018 municipal homelessness survey report (Malmö stad, 2019a) states that homelessness caused by a housing shortage does not "traditionally" fall under the responsibility of social services. At the same time, the report indicates that special leases were increasingly offered to this group, especially to families with children, since short-term emergency accommodation is expensive for the municipality and the waiting time in the local housing queue was deemed "unreasonable" for children. Similarly, according to our interviews, the main arguments for using special leases for this group were that (a) long-term solutions are more humane, not least when considering children, and (b) a regular apartment is often cheaper than other options. The pursuit of sustainable solutions for the structurally homeless in situations without better options was presented as one possible explanation for the increase in leases:

> Partly from a humanistic perspective but also from an economic perspective, because nothing is as cheap as solving this [situation] with an apartment with rent. And that was probably where it began, there were special leases for a certain group; to be able to control costs, the choice was made to expand that range and thus create a more solid second-hand or secondary housing market, as they say. That was, that has really been clear to everyone all along. It is not that one thought that it was good, or like, that one feel they have had much choice. But somehow it has been physically impossible to meet needs, as long as there has been this obligation that we have to help those who are in the city. (Informant 4)

Although the special leases were also used for the structurally homeless at the time of our interviews, our informants revealed that the requirements for receiving (any) support were nonetheless high and preceded by thorough investigations with high demands on personal responsibility. Social services step in when all other possibilities, such as social networks, have been exhausted. As a first step, the structurally homeless were normally offered temporary accommodation, for example, in hostels.

As a normative reflection on the system of using special leases as a solution for the structurally homeless and the potential implications thereof, one informant said:

> I also understand why we offer apartments…but I personally do not think that this is how the social services and the municipality should work to combat homelessness. In my eyes, it gets weird. Because I think that we are the social services, we cannot, like, forget our core mission. Our core mission is not really to solve the housing market in Sweden. (Informant 1)

The quote highlights the question of responsibilities and the role of the social services, as the informant problematizes that they are put in a position to resolve a structural issue. It appears contradictory to the informant that they on the one hand push clients to apply for housing on their own, whilst at the same time removing apartments from the regular market to use for special leases.

The experiences of the social service professionals illustrate how homelessness related to "social problems" is manageable, whereas dealing with situations deriving mainly from a housing shortage are seen as more complex. Yet, everyone needs a home, and the housing market issues are being "pushed down" to the social service level and left for the social workers to handle. This sometimes entails difficult situations and assessments regarding who is eligible for support or not, and one informant zeroed in on their difficult task:

> Sometimes I can think that both [municipal] departments and politics and, like, those who make the strategic decisions regarding this [situation] have really had a hard time making up their minds. And thereby sent the issue to the first line and let the social workers take [it]. (Informant 4)

In the context of tough situations on the regular housing market, the social workers are put in the front, at the "first line" as gatekeepers on whom the homeless individuals depend. However, the social workers' competence is in supporting people with social problems; influencing the housing supply is not within their power.

How homeless households are supposed to find adequate housing appears to be under constant negotiation. Despite the previously emphasized benefits of long-term solutions, the municipality's response to the situation in 2019 was to clarify the social services' target group and (re)define who is entitled to access more long-term housing support. Due to the new policy, social services turn away the structurally homeless today, and they are referred to finding housing via the regular housing provision channels. As Sahlin (2020) indicates, the new guidelines recognize the core structural issues, but contradictorily, they also entail a "responsibilization" of the individual in the pursuit of housing. Hence, there is a "de-responsibilization" of the welfare state (Samzelius, 2020, p. 247): "As the welfare state recedes, individuals are increasingly expected to rely on primary networks or seek other options on 'the market.'" Already before the implementation of the new guidelines, homeless people were expected to try to find housing on their own. Now, however, the responsibility is placed completely on the homeless individuals themselves, despite the idea that the welfare system should provide a safety net. This strategy eases the burden on social services and possibly lowers the number of officially reported homeless people in Malmö. Sahlin (2020, p. 48) offers an explanation for the guidelines: "When homelessness and the costs for temporary accommodation grow, while the housing market remains tight, a municipality may react through narrowing its target groups for homeless accommodation."

6. Renegotiations of the Right to Support—And a Changed Homelessness?

The interpretation of the Social Services Act (Department of Social Affairs, 2001) was a recurring theme in the interviews. The new guidelines from 2019 are meant to clarify the social services' responsibility regarding homelessness and be "an adaptation to current case law" (Malmö stad, 2020a, p. 5, authors' translation). The guidelines state that, for example, "suffering from the housing shortage" or a "poor economy which makes it difficult to meet a landlord's requirements" alone are insufficient as reasons for eligibility for support. The bottom line is that "social services are not a housing agency" (Malmö stad, 2019b, p. 1, authors' translations). This has meant a renegotiation of how support is offered. In short, the structurally homeless are no longer entitled to long-term solutions like special leases, and they are referred to emergency shelters, which offer housing for a maximum of one week at a time (Sahlin, 2020). Other Swedish municipalities also show a focus on social problems and a "reluctance within social services to become some sort of housing agency" (Wirehag, 2021, p. 100). Similar strategies can be seen in Stockholm and Gothenburg (Samzelius, 2020).

In 2020, the City of Malmö declared the new strategy successful: They could show a decrease in homelessness by almost half between 2018 and 2020 (Habul, 2020), from 1,959 to 1,112 adults or from 3,384 to 2,312 if special leases are included. Apart from the new regulations, the municipality listed other factors that contributed to this development: increased investments in housing counseling staff to support people in finding their own housing, increased access to apartments through special leases from both the municipal and private rental markets, and decreased migration (Malmö stad, 2020c).

Not everyone shares this optimism, however. In a report to the local politicians, the Union for Professionals (Akademikerförbundet SSR), which represents social workers, presented accounts of local members' experiences. The report describes the new regulations as arbitrary, legally questionable, and devastating for, for example, families with children, as "children have to pay the price for a failing housing market by repeatedly having to move and live for long periods of time under insecure conditions" (Union for Professionals, 2021, p. 1, authors' translations). The report suggests that the strategies are a way to manipulate statistics rather than to decrease homelessness. The official homelessness statistics do not include individuals who are rejected as ineligible for support or those who do not choose to seek support from social services for various reasons (see also Sahlin, 2020). The view is shared by the local City Mission in the tertiary welfare system (Skåne Stadsmission, 2020, 2021). The Union for Professionals and the City Mission both highlight that there is a risk if socially homeless persons are "re-classified" as structurally homeless if their situations improve, since it can mean that they lose their support with housing.

In the local 2022 survey, the number of homeless individuals continued to decrease, not at least among the structurally homeless, to a total of 1,381 adults (Malmö stad, 2022). The City Mission remains critical of the statistics (Skåne Stadsmission, 2022). By "adjusting" who deserves help, the social services must develop and negotiate new standards concerning the type of support that can be provided, and to whom. No other public authority is taking responsibility for the people who no longer qualify but are nevertheless homeless (Sahlin, 2020).

7. Conclusion

This article has illustrated how the welfare systems interact with and counteract each other against the backdrop of reduced access to welfare support in combination with an increasingly neoliberal housing regime. The excluding factors that contribute substantially to the current homelessness are arguably situated within the primary welfare system and the housing market, and this article highlights how the secondary welfare system manages these outcomes via social services. We describe this as a contradiction between welfare systems, where the boundaries between the three levels of welfare provision are subject to ongoing negotiation.

Moreover, the social services negotiate the increased and somewhat changed homelessness in relation to their professional roles and assignments. A conflictual and ambiguous situation emerges between "traditional" supportive social work and homelessness due primarily to difficulties finding housing. Distinguishing between social and structural homelessness based on the cause of homelessness leads to the exclusion of certain individuals in search of housing. The new guidelines established in 2019 have been criticized for leaving a large group of homeless people without support. However, the number of (officially) homeless individuals has decreased.

Social services and their individually focused housing measures cannot resolve the structural core issue of inequality. As our analysis has illustrated, on the systemic level, the different housing solutions for homeless people provided by social services are a way to handle the urgent and disruptive situation that homelessness is. Following the logic and formulation of "structural homelessness" however, these solutions do not change the housing market in terms of addressing the distributive issues that shape housing inequality. Instead, they might be described as putting out fires. On the individual level, the special leases and certainly the short-term emergency solutions do not change a household's "position" in the housing market. People in need of housing have already been side-lined or expelled from the regular housing market; at the same time, they do not qualify for support from social services. Inequality in the housing market leads to ad-hoc solutions, which affects people in search of housing.

By bridging housing and social work research, we have contributed new knowledge about the relationship

between the primary and secondary welfare systems and the connection between homelessness and housing policies. The complex relationship between the welfare systems may be obscured by the separation of the two fields of research and policy. We see a change in how homelessness is defined and the further marginalization of people who are ineligible for support from social services. How urgent cases are handled on a daily basis and the new "solutions" that emerge both define the future housing market for people in need of affordable housing. The re-working of social work in relation to the erosion of the universal welfare regime is one example of the partial destruction and trend creation, as mentioned by Rolnik (2019), that form housing inequality in Sweden.

Based on this study, examining the responsibility for housing provision for those who are currently excluded from the primary and (largely) the secondary welfare systems is an area in which valuable further research could be conducted. Including different actors on various scales—for example, from the welfare system, politics, and the private sector—could lead to deeper understandings.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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