
“You Live the Same Day 24/7, Day In and Day Out”: Managing Everyday Life in Homelessness in Sweden

Lina Wallberg, Kristina Alstam and Frida Petersson

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

➤ **Abstract_** *This article, part of a participatory longitudinal study, explores how roofless individuals manage everyday life in a major Swedish city. Based on qualitative interviews with nine participants who have extensive experience of homelessness, the study examines daily routines, safety strategies, and ways of navigating life without stable housing through the lens of everyday life theory. The findings show that participants' everyday practices are structured around continuous movement through the city—between semi-public spaces, day centres, and public transport—where managing time and space becomes essential to access shelter and meet basic needs. This movement is shaped by factors such as opening hours and border control, including patrolling security guards and social pressures to conform to societal norms. Access to housing or temporary shelter is often contingent upon complying with social service regulations, and available options are sometimes described as unsafe. For some, staying outdoors is perceived as a safer or more autonomous choice than accepting formal support. These findings align with previous research about life on the streets and highlight the need for changes in both policy and practice to better address the needs of people living roofless.*

➤ **Keywords_** *Homeless, everyday life, roofless, social service, street, place*

Introduction

Homelessness and housing exclusion continue to be a significant societal problem and a growing area of concern in Europe and beyond. Even in the Nordic region, often cast as comprising countries with the most far-reaching welfare systems in the world, homelessness remains a persistent problem. Among the Nordic countries, Sweden stands out with the highest rate of homelessness relative to its population (Benjaminsen et al., 2020). According to the most recent Swedish homelessness count in 2023, over 27 000 people were experiencing homelessness, and of these individuals, 4 400 lived in “acute homelessness” (NBHW 2024).¹ The term “Acute homelessness” corresponds to ETHOS² term “Roofless”, which indicates people sleeping rough or subsiding in emergency accommodation. This development has been traced back to the early 1990s and a “neoliberal turn” that meant increased market orientation of Swedish housing policy (Sahlin 2020, p. 178). As a result, homelessness has become the responsibility of local social services rather than a national housing problem. Homeless and housing scholars have highlighted the need to focus on the right to housing, rather than on presumed individual deficiencies among homeless individuals (Anderberg & Dahlberg 2019), and to address structural dimensions contributing to homelessness, such as lack of affordable housing, (Grander, 2018; Wirehag 2022), unregulated allocation of rental housing (Sahlin 2020) and precarious housing situations (Listerborn 2021).³ There is a related qualitative research strand that addresses how structural aspects of the homeless problem are experienced and managed by people experiencing homelessness (e.g. Hansen Löfstrand, 2005; Samzelius, 2020). Much of the existing research highlights situations where the individuals in question are temporarily housed—representing the largest group of people experiencing homelessness in Sweden. As a result, there is still limited knowledge about the everyday lives and struggles of people living roofless (but see Levy, 2022). In Sweden, social services hold the ultimate responsibility for individuals experiencing homelessness (NBHW, 2024), yet existing research indicate that they often fail to meet the needs of many of those living on the street or in temporary accommodation (Wirehag et al., 2021). In this article, ETHOS term *roofless* will be used, referring to individuals living on

¹ The Swedish definition of homelessness is divided into four situations: 1. Acute homelessness (staying in night-shelters or in places not intended to live in), 2. Living in an institution soon to be released, 3. Long-term housing under certain rules and conditions, 4. Self-arranged short-term accommodation (NBHW 2024).

² The term “Roofless” in ETHOS (the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) corresponds to people sleeping rough or subsiding in emergency accommodation). <https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf>

³ After lacking a national action plan on homelessness for more than a decade, in 2022 the Swedish Government launched a Housing first oriented homeless strategy for 2022-2026 (S2022/03255) and budgeted four million each year for its local level implementation.

the streets, in emergency accommodation, or in similar conditions. Exploring their daily routines, their experiences with social services, and the reasons they give for living on the streets is crucial—both for designing appropriate support measures and for informing policy decisions.

This article offers an in-depth exploration of the everyday lives of nine homeless individuals with experience of rooflessness in a major Swedish city. Focus is aimed at the ordinary activities, interactions, routines and strategies which “texture the everyday life” (Kalekin-Fishman 2013, p.722). Particular attention is given to how these individuals perceive support and encounter potential barriers within the social services system. The article begins by reviewing previous research and theoretical perspectives on everyday life in the context of homelessness. It then outlines the study’s methodology, including the setting and data collection process. This is followed by an analysis and presentation of the findings, focusing on the structure of everyday life for roofless individuals and the potential barriers they face in accessing support. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings’ relevance and their implications for practice and policy.

Everyday life in homelessness

In their classic study, Snow and Anderson (1993) make an in-depth exploration of “life on the streets as experienced by the homeless, their strategies and struggles to subsist from one moment to the next, materially, socially, and psychologically” (p.IX-X). Their results conflicted with the prevailing, “big data”-based knowledge on homeless people, casting them as pathological deviants in need of control. Instead, Snow and Anderson highlighted the normalcy of the homeless individuals they encountered and the disabling character of the society surrounding them. Two Swedish studies that follow this tradition but focus exclusively on homeless women are those by Rosengren (2003) and Thörn (2004). Both studies provide examples of how the women navigate the stigmatizing position of homelessness in their interactions with social services and the general public. They also highlight how the women are often forced to either adapt to the housing options offered or choose to sleep in public spaces (Rosengren, 2003; Thörn, 2004).

Several studies highlight the mobility that characterizes everyday life when living roofless. Time is often spent moving between certain places in a regular pattern governed by both locations of homeless services, but also by regulations of space in the city (Wardhaugh, 1996; Caswell & Schultz, 2006; Jackson, 2012; Temesvary, 2019; Gouseti, 2025). Homeless people respond and react to these constraints and challenges through developing strategies to meet basic needs (such as food,

sleep, and personal security), and to “pass” as domiciled (Snow & Mulcahy 2001, Casey et al., 2008; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Menih, 2020; Wardhaugh, 1996; Wardhaugh, 2000).

Hsieh (2017) argues in her narrative review that spending most of your time in the street increases exposure to various forms of violence, particularly at night and especially for women. Besides physical or sexual violence, individuals may also experience symbolic violence and social stigma facing sanctions for deviating from societal norms, through as example being associated with dirt or mental illness. Furthermore, structural violence manifests through measures such as the criminalization of begging or sleeping in the street (Hsieh, 2017). In other studies from the US, UK, and Australia examining homeless women’s exposure to violence, similar patterns are described in how women manage risky situations. Among these strategies are choosing carefully where to stay at night, for example, squatting in a “hidden” public place, carrying a weapon, being careful with what drug you take, sleeping close to surveillance cameras etc. (Casey et al., 2008; MacDonald, 2014; Menih, 2020). Another recent study from Gothenburg, Sweden, where this research also takes place, highlights the precarious situation of homeless women, who may feel safe within women-only shelters, but face imminent risk of violence outside or in mixed shelters (Grange, 2025).

Several scholars have argued that the political climate in both Europe and the US has taken a more restrictive turn towards visibly homeless populations over the last two decades, focusing safety and order in public places through anti-homeless laws, news articles, excluding design and border control⁴ (Doherty et al., 2008; Gerrard and Farrugia, 2015; Hsieh, 2017; Goldfischer, 2018; Pospech, 2020). For example, while semi-public places (such as shopping malls, terminals, and train stations, frequently used by homeless people) are seemingly open for all members of society, they are regulated by opening hours, controlled by security guards, and often designed for commercial use or just passing by (Doherty et al., 2008). A unique semi-public space is the library, which studies show fills an important role for people living roofless by providing shelter, seats for resting, toilets, books, and computers for leisure (Hodgetts et al., 2008; Marler, 2023).

Potential barriers to social service engagement among roofless individuals are another area of interest for this study. Previous research points to various reasons for avoiding shelters, including concerns about safety and sanitary conditions, distrust of services providers, a desire to avoid pity or past experiences of inadequate care, triggers for substance use, strict shelter regulations, lack of accessi-

⁴ Border control refers to different ways of keeping unwanted people away from public or semi-public spaces through, for example, guards and surveillance (Sahlin, 1996; Doherty et al., 2008).

bility or restrictions on bringing pets or family members to the shelter (Caswell & Schultz, 2006; Donley & Wright, 2012; Bender et al., 2018; Fahnøe, 2018; Bowpitt, 2020; Tsai et al., 2024).

Theories of Everyday Life

We live our everyday life in different cultural and societal contexts. Being born into a specific context means getting access to previous interpretations or experiences of the world, a kind of 'everyday heritage' which we comprehend and imbibe through our sociability (Mead, 1934/1995). In addition, the understanding of and involvement in everyday life is shared with others through experiences and through actions (Schutz, 1962/2002). And yet, for each one, the world is comprehended as a kind of totality. This is what is sometimes referred to as our *life world* (Ahrne, 1981). A characteristic of our everyday life is that it is experienced as well as known to us, as most of the activities we perform are done so through routines. There is a set of informal but almost ritualised rules of how to do these routines, therefore also a "wrong way" to do it (Garfinkel, 1967). Living outside the taken-for-granted, like during homelessness, creates a rupture of expectation that needs to be adjusted to or reflected on.

And yet, after a certain time living roofless, even this situation becomes mundane and filled with routines. Everyday life is lived through places and through time, since everything that takes place during a day does so by occurring in a particular place, and at a particular time. When analyzing the participants' interviews, specific attention has been given to accounts relating to time, places, and boundaries, as well as the skills described as necessary to survive when living roofless.

Research design

Methodology

This article is part of an ongoing PhD project – a qualitative, longitudinal study exploring everyday life in homelessness and transitions through homelessness over time. It draws on the first set of interviews conducted with nine individuals with experience of living roofless. The broader PhD study has been co-constructed with a reference group comprising three individuals with extensive previous personal experiences of homelessness. The reference group did not take part in the data collection nor as interviewees in the study, but actively contributed through regular workshops discussing the study's scope and informing the direction of this article

by helping to select key analytical themes⁵. Involving the reference group from an early stage allowed them to offer valuable insights from a lived-experience perspective. The original aim of the broader study was to explore pathways through homelessness. A key contribution from the reference group was to deepen the focus on everyday-life activities by, for example, adding a question to the interview guide about describing an ordinary day as roofless. This co-productive approach aims to collaboratively generate knowledge that resonates with—and is relevant to—individuals experiencing homelessness (Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2021), as well as to policymakers and the scientific community. The project has been ethically approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023-03342-01).

Setting

In Sweden, homelessness services are organized at a municipal level, leading to significant variation between urban areas. This means that where you live in the country affects what kinds of support you are entitled to (Wirehag, 2022). To access housing support, individuals must first be assessed as eligible for assistance by the local social services by demonstrating that they experience specific challenges in securing housing on their own, given that the social services only provide housing assistance as a last resort. Housing services can, after this, be provided by either the municipality or by external organizations such as NGOs and private stakeholders.

This study has been conducted in Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden, inhabited by 600 000 people. The city is facing increasing segregation and unequal living conditions, and the housing market is strained (City of Gothenburg, 2023). In 2023, 2 581 adults were reported homeless in Gothenburg, and of these, 475 persons experienced sleeping rough or staying in emergency accommodation (NBHW, 2024). Over 1 000 individuals are residing in a secondary housing market⁶ through social services, including both apartments and shared accommodations. Few options exist for temporary housing support without getting through the process of being eligible for support from the social services, and there is only one emergency shelter in the city where you can get a bed while staying anonymous. This shelter requires applying for a bed every night, in competition with other roofless individuals.

⁵ This process is described under the headline "Analysis".

⁶ The secondary housing market involves Social Services subletting second- or third-hand rental units to homeless clients through special contracts that waive security of tenure. This practice has reinforced exclusion from the regular housing market and contributed to the growth of alternative housing forms (Sahlin, 1996)

In contrast to the national level, the city has made considerable efforts to combat homelessness for many years, through, for example, introducing Housing First⁷, and is now struggling to meet the political goals of ending homelessness in the city by 2028.

Recruitment and data collection

This article is based on nine qualitative interviews conducted in the autumn of 2023 with individuals who have extensive experience of living roofless (four women and five men). Participants ranged in age from 40 to 75 years, and most had many years of experience living roofless and moving between various housing situations. The interview guide was designed with open-ended questions, following the narrative approach outlined by Riessman (2008) and Creswell and Poth (2017). Questions focused on experiences of homelessness over time and interactions with the social service system, allowing space for participants' personal narratives and subjective experiences. All participants were personally recruited by the first author from various day centres, cafés, and shelters—operated by both municipal and non-governmental organizations—that serve the city's homeless population. The recruitment process involved the first author spending several days at each location, engaging with visitors and providing information about the study. Individuals who expressed interest were given a more detailed explanation of the project and what participation would entail. Interviews were then scheduled based on each participant's preferences and practical considerations, and they were given time to reflect on their decision to participate.

The selection criteria for participation included adults (over 18 years) with current or recent experiences of living roofless. All interviews were conducted by the first author in a private room, either within or near the homeless facility or at the university, to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were audio recorded, and informed consent was obtained orally. Each interview lasted between approximately 45 minutes and two hours and was transcribed verbatim by the first author. Participants were offered a supermarket gift card as compensation for their time; some accepted it, while others declined. To protect anonymity, all identifying information related to individuals and locations has been altered, and participants have been assigned pseudonyms. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Given the relatively small homeless community in Gothenburg, no specific details regarding participants' age, ethnicity, or other identifying traits are disclosed.

⁷ The Housing First model, developed by Pathways to Housing, provides immediate housing to chronically homeless individuals without requiring sobriety or treatment. Support is offered through a 24/7 interdisciplinary ACT team, emphasizing consumer choice and individual needs (Tsemberis et al., 2004)

Code name	Gender	Current housing situation
Alexander	Male	Living roofless for several years.
Arthur	Male	Living roofless for a couple of years.
Ellen	Female	Just moved to the secondary housing market after living roofless for a year.
Charlie	Male	Living in the secondary housing market for about a year, with many years' experiences of living roofless and in temporary housing.
Caroline	Female	Living in the secondary housing market for a couple of years after many years living roofless.
Emma	Female	Living in the secondary housing market for about a year.
Gabriel	Male	Living in permanent housing since a couple of years, with earlier experience of living roofless.
Oscar	Male	Living roofless for several years.
Sofia	Female	Not disclosed.

The analysis of the material was an ongoing process, conducted both during and after data collection, using an abductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the first author read through the material multiple times to identify recurrent themes, supported by the use of NVivo. This process resulted in the identification of seven themes: Time and movement in the city; Managing practical matters such as money and belongings while living roofless; The significance of social relationships; Experiences with the social services system; Women's vulnerability in homelessness; Becoming a "client"; and finally, The significance of individuals who went the extra mile to help. Subsequently, a workshop was held with the reference group, during which these themes were discussed and reflected upon. Based on this discussion, three broader themes were identified as most central to the article and were selected for their relevance to both social work practice and academic research: The practical management of everyday life while living roofless, Survival strategies on the street, and Participants' experiences with social services. Furthermore, to enhance academic quality, the results were discussed with the co-authors and analysed in relation to theories of everyday life and previous research.

The findings focus on various aspects of managing everyday life on the streets while living roofless. The chapter begins by describing an ordinary day, structured by time, movement between places, and the handling of practical matters such as belongings and money. This is followed by a section on surviving on the street and managing fear, which highlights that danger cannot be avoided but must be navigated through learned strategies. The chapter concludes with the theme of navigating the social services system, including participants' reasons for declining available support.

An ordinary day on the streets

When asked about their daily life, participants described it as structured by passing the time, getting basic needs met, and attending to the opening and closing hours of semi-public places. A common initial reaction when asked to describe an ordinary day was that “there is not much to tell”. As Alexander puts it: “You live the same day 24/7, day in and day out”. This reality, although characterized by uncertainty and insecurity, includes an everyday rhythm where movements between specific places in the city in accordance with specific points of time related to the opening hours of emergency shelters and homeless services, as well as closing and opening hours of public places and public transport, which Jackson (2012) has described as “fixed mobility”.

The participants’ days usually start early, whether in an emergency shelter or in a public or semi-public place (streets, vehicle parks). Emergency shelter rules usually allow you to stay no longer than 10 am, after which the residents and all their belongings must be gone. If spending the night in a public or semi-public place, you need to wake up and gather your belongings before the public arrives, like Emma describes after spending the night in a playhouse in someone’s backyard: “I put a clean sheet on a bed in there, put in earplugs, and slept until six in the morning. Then I slipped away – there was no sign that I had been there.” Arthur describes an ordinary day in the following way:

Sitting on the bus to pass the time. Well, now you’re in the shopping mall, the security guards pass you once, twice, ten times: “Why are you sitting here during the day?” So, then you go down to the city. I go to the library. You can’t use the computer for more than an hour, so I usually sit around 40 minutes looking for a job. Then, what else? Two hours pass, two and a half hours. If it rains, I sit and read. If it’s not raining, what can I do? I’m a smoker, I [take] a cigarette. I walk around, maybe some church somewhere is handing out food, coffee and cake or something. Then it’s just a matter of walking up and down. Until you need to make the call [to get a bed at the local shelter], at 5 pm. Maybe you get a bed, maybe you don’t. If you don’t; okay, then you stay in McDonalds until 2 am. Since buses and carriages stop between 2 am to 4.30 am you are out in the cold, and now it is winter. From 4.30 am you go to the Central station and sit there. Because then it opens. Then it gets light again.

This quote illustrates that *keeping time* and *spending time* when living roofless is crucial for keeping warm, getting food and money, and accessing shelter for the night. Arthur’s days and nights, like the other participants, are structured around movement in the city. When staying what is perceived to be too long in a semi-public place, like sitting at a bench in an indoor shopping mall, Arthur knows that security guards are going to approach him and that it is time to move on (see

Doherty et al., 2008). The knowledge about where to go for food, warmth, or shelter, about opening hours, and or the accepted length of staying in places, is gained through long experience of homelessness. This knowledge is shared among those in similar situations, becoming part of their everyday life (Schutz, 1962/2002). This finding is a recurrent feature in other studies (Snow and Anderson, 1993; Wardhaug, 1996; Jackson, 2012). Even the uncertain elements of the everyday routines: The fact that you never know if you are going to get a bed to sleep in for the night, or if you are going to survive, is incorporated in the everyday routines, with a constant plan B.

Getting to this point of daily routines is a process, whereas you, when new on the street, experience fear and uncertainty about where to go and what to do (see also Snow and Anderson, 1993). Although these elements remain when you have more experience of living roofless, it seems like making the uncertainty part of a daily routine could be a coping strategy; feelings of fear are described as something you put aside and learn to live with. Another important point in Arthur's excerpt, shared with several of the participants, is the importance of keeping a check on time to get access to the emergency shelter. At the allocated time, there are usually many people calling the unit responsible for allocating the limited number of beds in the shelter. This appointment, created by the social support system to control access to the available beds, signifies that Arthur ends up in a competitive situation with other homeless people. These uncertainties characterizing time and space are controlled by security guards, closing and opening hours, which means you never know if you will get shelter for the night. While everyday life is typically described as predictable, for the people in rooflessness, it is lived in a precarious terrain of institutional arrangements and societal expectations that don't align with the material conditions they must navigate; the extreme becomes everyday routines.

Between various appointments during the day, you need to find ways to spend the time. Oscar describes that due to an aching body, he cannot spend his days walking. Instead, he uses public transportation during the daytime, which allows him to sit a bit more comfortably without security guards telling him to leave: "So, I'm just sitting on the boat. Maybe I can get hold of a newspaper, so I can read the newspaper. And they have proper armchairs." This statement illustrates how the participants' use of public transportation deviates from societal norms of using public transportation. Rather than a means of getting from point A to point B, public transport becomes a place to meet basic needs of rest and to spend the many hours during the daytime waiting for the emergency homeless services to open. Later in the interview, Oscar underlined that he has the right to use public transport. At the same time, he points out that the drivers clearly do not appreciate him sitting in their coaches for several hours. Although he is not directly asked to leave the

vehicle, he says that he feels their disapproval, judging from certain looks or questions asked to him, which can be seen as an example of the symbolic violence directed towards people living roofless (Hsieh, 2017).

According to the participants, performing basic needs and tasks (such as sleeping, washing up, and going to the bathroom) is a daily challenge when living roofless; sitting at a bench in the public space is accepted, but the minute you lie down, security guards come and move you along. Oscar describes a situation when “[t]his person fell asleep in a bus stop, and three guards showed up out of nowhere. It was raining and stormy, and they just pushed him out from the bus stop”. While sleeping in public spaces is not prohibited by law or local regulations, public transportation is operated by a regionally owned company, which has its own rules governing acceptable behavior on its vehicles. Sleeping in your seat is accepted when using public transport, provided you have a valid ticket; sleeping at a bench in a bus stop is not. When meeting basic needs becomes prohibited in public space, homeless people are left without a place to do these actions (Caswell & Schultz, 2006; Doherty et al., 2008).

Navigating semi-public and designated places

Libraries are mentioned as important for seeking shelter, attaining leisure time, and as a space for passing the hours. But even at libraries, the waiting can be hard, as Oscar puts it: “Even if you are a bookworm. Ten hours at the library... How many academics, how many people can... Ten hours!”. Even though libraries differ from other semi-public places in the way that they are not built for consumption only, they are also characterised by border control and regulations of space (Doherty et al., 2008), which for homeless people becomes present through subtle allusions. If spending too many hours, the participants describe certain looks from the staff that tell you it's about time to leave, you only have the computers for a certain time, and the bathrooms are usually locked. This corresponds to other studies about the library being both including and excluding homeless people (Hodgetts et.al, 2008; Marler, 2023).

Places like day centers, etc., usually have a more inclusive ambition: you can be anonymous, and the activities are free of charge. Some places serve food, hand out clothes, and sometimes you have the possibility to sleep for a few hours, take a shower, do laundry, etc. Several of these places are open to all in need⁸, while

⁸ All in need in these cases have the significance that you don't have to prove that you are in a specific need, rather that, just by showing up at these places it means that you have the need to be there, for financial or social support etc.

others are aimed at homeless people. Ellen, who by the time of the interview had been living roofless for around a year, describes one of these day centers, aimed to support homeless women:

In here I met a lot of people. And to see the staff help so many people, it was incredible, it's absolutely incredible every day. That they stand there and cook for you... And every day they bake, and fixes everything! Washing your dishes. They change the baskets that you throw your garbage in- Who would have done that? And like, I get clean clothes, hygiene items, I can shower. And never are you told: NO! They always say yes.

Ellen's description of how the staff actively helps and supports her contrasts with the way she is generally treated by society. As a woman living roofless, she is exposed to different kinds of violence and social stigma (Hsieh, 2017), so being treated with respect becomes a remarkable difference for her. However, although open centers represent themselves as welcoming for all in need, there is still a possibility of being banned if your behavior is perceived as unacceptable. Because of this, these places evoke a range of emotions. For example, Alexander described a church-based day center—which other participants characterized as welcoming—as follows: “It says in the law that a church can never ban a homeless person who has nowhere to go or eat... A church must not, absolutely never, ban anyone. But this place has done that; they deport many people. I'm banned there for life, apparently.” In addition to the psychological impact of being excluded from both broader society and spaces allegedly open to all, there are also physical consequences of having no place to meet your basic physical needs. As a result, individuals are compelled to carry out daily routines in ways that deviate from societal norms, aligning with Garfinkel's (1967) assertion that, through social learning, there are ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ ways of performing everyday activities. Living roofless thus creates a life world shaped by exclusionary mechanisms, where the performance of ordinary routines becomes stigmatized due to their divergence from normative expectations.

Managing practical things

A big challenge living in rooflessness is how and where to keep your belongings. Important items are kept close to the body, but clothes and other things are washed when possible or collected from aid organisations. Belongings become representatives of your daily routines, since you are dependent on them for your everyday activities to function. Without a home to store your belongings, you must decide which belongings you can manage without. This creates uncertainty and a rupture in the ability to manage your everyday life. Since the city has no economic interest in providing storage for people living roofless, options like cheap lockers at the central station are now gone. Caroline, with a long experience of living roofless, describes this situation:



I've slept a lot outside, in the middle of winter, freezing cold. I have dragged around sleeping bags, hidden them somewhere, then they're gone later. They lock the Central Station; they lock the shopping mall. So, there's nowhere. Had you been able to lock it up during daytime in a cupboard, then it would have stayed there.

During the interviews, participants showed me belongings they valued, which, unlike Caswell & Schultz's (2006) study, were not survival items, but contents in cellphones like photos of loved ones, places they had lived, diaries, and songs that reflected their lives. I was also shown saved cut-out articles that represented important aspects of their life. These artifacts were small and easy to carry around; still, they represented something important and seemed to function as a sort of life preserver, a way for the participants to keep memories and a self-presentation (see also Hodgetts et al., 2010). Gabriel described how he tried to handle his belongings and maintain an occupation while living roofless:

Out of the shelter at 8 o'clock in the morning. I had to bring all my things: shampoo, brush, T-shirt, jacket, schoolbooks, I went to school! Took a shower at the school and locked my bag there. When the classes ended; to the library, until they closed and then to the shelter the next night again. And so, it went on.

Gabriel's example shows the complexities of keeping up with a normative lifestyle while homeless. Even though your belongings are representatives of your everyday life, they cannot be taken for granted and become a part of a sort of fixed movement (Jackson, 2012) in space and time; belongings travel around in the city together with their owners, who must be prepared to lose them at any time.

Practicing your basic needs outdoors, like going to the bathroom, eating, drinking, and keeping your belongings safe, is expensive. If you also need drugs or alcohol to function, the expenses are even higher, as Alexander puts it: "A Day for me? [laughs], I walk around... And make money. Maybe not in a legal way, so to speak, but you must survive. The main thing is that you have food on the table". Ellen takes another standpoint when describing her way of financing the street-life: "I've picked cans, and deposited cans, a lot, to get by on the weekends. I have not been ashamed for a single second to rummage through the trash cans. I thought: As long as I don't steal anything, I'll do this". The participants present different stances when talking about making money or engaging in *shadow work* (Wardhaug, 1996), but several of the participants manage their financial situation without getting support from the social services. In this way, they stress that they can handle their situation, not being a burden to anyone. Money is a source of both security and danger: To have money means getting by during the day, being able to invite other people to a cigarette, etc., which gets you allies. But having money also means exposing yourself to the risk of getting robbed, and without an address, it is hard to get a credit card, so you often must carry cash. Strategies for managing belong-

ings and money are key parts of the daily routines and uncertainties when living roofless. Managing practicalities like belongings and money is, in this way, characterized by volatility, constant movement, and uncertainty, being simultaneously a source of security and danger.

Surviving on the street

Surviving on the street is described as difficult and dangerous, but also as a learning process, where people in the same situation help each other out. Several of the participants say (with pride) that politicians would not make it through a week out on the street, as Alexander puts it: "It's not just Vietnam warriors who see too much. So do we homeless people. The worst is at night then, with everything. Crime, drugs, drug trafficking, stabbings, gunshots". Spending years on the street, witnessing and experiencing violence, carries expectations about again be subjected to violence and you must always be prepared for this. Determining which places and people to trust and which to avoid constitutes a constant ambivalence. Strategies consist of both being with other people and staying away from people, since people represent both danger and security (see also Fahnøe, 2018). As other study's point out (Casey et al., 2008; MacDonald, 2014; Hsieh, 2017; Menih, 2020; Grange, 2025) being out on the street, especially in the nighttime, is described as dangerous, especially for women, but being offered a bed in someone's apartment is often equal with accepting to make a sexual payment for the stay or risk getting abused. Emma describes how she has tried to stay in the homes of others:

These years I've tried being a lodger and sharing an apartment. With different people. And it has not gone well. Four men or more have expected sex. There was a man who tried to throw himself into bed and thought we should cuddle. I was completely shocked and kind of bounced into the wall. So, I had to go out in the middle of the night sometimes. I was so terrified so I couldn't stay.

As a homeless woman, the potential danger of accepting a bed in someone's house must be weighed against the risk of sleeping outside. Some of the participants describe keeping awake by walking during the night as a way both to stay safe and to remain invisible. Caroline describes trying to stay safe at nighttime:

Something I've thought about very often is that "where do all the homeless people go at night?" For everyone, just pof, they're gone! I've managed all by myself. I was sick once, so I went into a public toilet, and I vomited everywhere, I cleaned up in there and then I made my bed. I had a high fever. Then a security guard comes and just "Take your shit and get out of here" and it was freezing outside... The only thing I thought was: I had heard that the women sleep outside



the City Library. Because we women must sleep where we are seen, among other people. And preferably in a group. Because there are so many sex offenders out there.

When Caroline was evicted from the space she had tried to make comfortable, her only option was to seek out other women for protection. This aligns with Menih (2020), who describes how women sleeping rough develop night-time strategies to stay safe, such as squatting in hidden places or staying close to others. While participants emphasized the particular dangers faced by women, men also described similar strategies—avoiding certain areas due to who might be there or asserting themselves through acts like participating in fights to gain respect. Stories of violence and danger tied to specific places in the city are shared among people living roofless, yet due to limited route options, these places are often impossible to avoid.

Navigating the social services system

Despite the hardship described when living roofless, some of the participants rarely mention getting support from the Municipality's social services. Although stories are shared about meeting helpful professionals, seeking support for more stable housing don't seem like an option for some, corresponding with other studies showing that reasons like security, distrust or not seeing the point make some homeless people choose to fend for themselves instead of seeking help (Donley & Wright, 2012; Bender's et al., 2018; Fahnøe, 2018; Bowpitt, 2020; Tsai et al., 2024). The participants describe how, at times, managing on their own feels safer than sleeping in a shelter. They also express a reluctance to adapt to certain rules and regulations of specific places, or that they are not allowed to sleep with a partner or bring their pet to the shelter. When asked about how he feels about seeking support, Oscar states that "Unfortunately, I judge people by their occupation, and social workers are the worst". Several of the participants have tried to stay in the secondary housing market, but for some, this has not worked out, or they have opted themselves out. To get access to housing support, you go through a process of categorization to fit into a specific housing option (Löfstrand, 2005), but when the participants don't adapt to these categories, the alternative seems to be to stay out of the social services system. One of the participants, Sofia, describes how she feels when living for a long time in the secondary housing market:

It can damage you. Living there gives you complications in the brain; in a year I am changed as a human being. When you are homeless, you are left out throughout society, because it's shaped after a certain category of people. That's so excluding. And how are they going to take care of you in the housing? It takes time to get healed when you are completely homeless. Many people would rather choose to be outside, there is more freedom there. But the outside is not so suitable either.

Besides the long-term excluding mechanisms described when living in the secondary housing market, physical danger also seems to be present. Caroline describes living in one particular housing as kind of a false security, there is staff nearby and you have your room, but at the same time you can't protect yourself from the other tenants: Men living in the same facility. She describes how she, after many years of living roofless, decided to accept staying in a housing unit, even though she felt unsafe, because this was the only way of gaining access to a long-term apartment:

I stayed at this worthless accommodation. I was supposed to get help with addiction and sort things out and everything, but nothing happened. The men went in and out of our rooms, the women were exposed. The staff just locked themselves in the office. It was not possible to be drug-free there. But as soon as I got the apartment now, I've stopped. It's my dream now to be with my child and grandchild as much as possible.

In other cases, seeking help from the social services is simply not included as an option, or shaped by mistrust. Opting out of support is described as already knowing that you don't have a chance, as Alexander describes: "If you have been homeless all your life and you suddenly get an apartment, there's always some way to ruin it and to end up on the street again". Unsanitary conditions or the hardship of keeping sober or getting evicted for taking a relapse are other difficulties mentioned. Charlie describes staying at a low threshold accommodation which led him back to drinking: "I shared a toilet with others, and I didn't know if it was water or piss on the floor, it was completely wet. I went to NA [narcotics anonymous], aiming to recover, but every day it was "Do you want a beer" and finally I cracked, so I said "Yes, why not". The choice of not accepting support can also be explained by the social services' requirements for adaptation to the support alternatives that are proposed (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003; Löfstrand, 2005), as in Sofia's case earlier. Resisting support from the social services can therefore become a necessary strategy for maintaining agency in a context when one's situation is governed by social policy (Bowpitt, 2020). The rules in the secondary housing market can also be perceived as impossible demands, as Ellen describes when trying to get shelter in the middle of the winter:

The coldest, it was minus 9 degrees Celsius, which we managed outside! [Laughs] I had the dog with me, and to keep him warm I had a sweater, which I put over him. He had to stay warm. We didn't get in anywhere. Tried to get a place for the night, I was completely desperate because it was so cold. But I was denied because I had the dog with me.

These examples of trying to navigate through the social services system and different housing options present participants with nearly impossible choices. To qualify for support, individuals must conform to and accept the options provided by social services, even if they feel unsafe or believe they can't recover in that environment. However, not accepting the support, to maintain their agency, they must also face a potentially dangerous situation. Managing the micro decisions of everyday life therefore, often comes down to deciphering a variety of institutionally formulated demands, and/or requirements, making the social and material aspects of homelessness stand out as a balancing act between different kinds of safety, where no option is optimal.

Discussion

This study explores the narratives of nine individuals experiencing homelessness and managing everyday life while living roofless. Although the number of participants is relatively small—and should not be viewed as representative of a broader, heterogeneous homeless population—they describe lives lived outside the support systems typically offered by social services to people experiencing homelessness in Sweden. Nevertheless, their experiences align with findings from other research, both European and non-European, that describe the struggles of living roofless. The analysis shows that strategies for navigating daily routines and mitigating risks on the street are closely tied to the structure and functioning of the local social services system. The participants' presence in the city is governed by regulations of space and border control (Doherty et al., 2008), such as security guards patrolling semi-public spaces and normative expectations about the appropriate use of urban areas, which hinder them from attending to basic needs. These mechanisms often restrict their presence in the city and contribute to a state of constant movement along specific routes. At the same time, participants attempt to pass the time while waiting for shelter access and manage time by adhering to strict schedules, such as opening hours and designated times for making phone calls to secure a place for the night. This enforced mobility, combined with the need to carry personal belongings at all times, shapes a form of daily existence that is both structured and precarious. It reflects a condition in which extreme uncertainty and survival are incorporated into the rhythms of everyday life. Since this study is built on interviews, combining it with ethnographic methods—such as following individuals living roofless in their daily lives and mapping their time-geography within the city—could add depth to the understanding of everyday life on the streets. An expanded study with a larger number of participants would also allow for compara-

tive analysis of how rooflessness is experienced across demographic groups such as age, ethnicity, citizenship status, and gender. This could deepen the understanding of homelessness and inform more effective policy interventions.

When both time and space are regulated by external control mechanisms, such as those described above, one way to maintain a sense of agency is to decline support from social services. By opting out of available support—or being denied access to it—participants become more vulnerable to violence and insecurity. As a result, they rely on strategies learned from peers to try to stay safe. These strategies include finding ways to obtain money, knowing which places to visit or avoid, staying awake during the night, or sleeping near others or hiding to avoid detection (see Wardhaugh, 1996; Menih, 2020). The participants cited several reasons for declining support from social services, including safety concerns—describing housing units as offering a false sense of security—as well as issues related to sanitation, restrictions on bringing pets to shelters, and a general sense of hopelessness or the belief that accepting support no longer serves a purpose. The empirical data show no major differences in how women and men articulate their reasons for avoiding social services. However, female participants frequently highlight the pervasive risk of sexualized violence in public spaces, when staying with acquaintances, and even in shelters, as also shown in Grange (2025). This is not mentioned by male participants, who instead emphasize general violence and insecurity. These findings suggest that safety for homeless women warrants closer attention. The presence of individuals left without support, as shown in this and other international studies, suggests that social services fail to meet the needs of certain groups. This underscores the need to review policies on support and housing options, and how these can be designed to ensure equitable access to the right to housing. It also reflects broader structural issues – such as housing market exclusion and systemic inequalities – that shape both the risk of becoming roofless and the prospects of exiting homelessness. Furthermore, a discursive gap emerges between how social services define support and how it is perceived by some recipients. This discrepancy warrants further examination—for instance, by comparing official policies with both the support actually provided and the lived experience of recipients. Such inquiry can shed light on how these dynamics shape the discretionary power of case workers who mediate access to services. These findings indicate a need for further research on the interactions between roofless individuals and case workers during support-seeking encounters, to better understand how access to assistance is negotiated in practice. Given that a significant portion of the homeless population in Sweden resides in the secondary housing market, it would also be valuable to explore their experiences and perceptions of the support they receive.

Public attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness, along with policies and resource allocation, shape the spatial and temporal constraints that roofless individuals encounter. It is therefore essential to make these social structures visible and subject to critical examination. Such understanding is vital for addressing—and ultimately counteracting—the structural marginalization that shapes the everyday lives of people living roofless, not only in Sweden but across other Western countries.

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