‘Lost in Translation’ – Problem Representations in Swedish Homelessness Policy

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Abstract_ *This article explores how the problem of homelessness is constructed and translated across multiple levels of governance. Drawing on a policy translation perspective alongside Bacchi’s WPR framework, it explores how national policy ideas are reshaped as they travel through regional and local levels, resulting in an avoidance of fiscal responsibility. Three policy documents from the national, regional and local levels are examined to understand how problem representations of homelessness are constructed and translated across governance contexts. The findings show that at the national level homelessness is framed as both a structural issue linked to poverty and housing provision, and as an individual issue associated with mental ill-health and addiction. In contrast, at the regional and local levels, homelessness is divided into ‘structural’ and ‘social’ categories, with ‘structural’ homelessness considered to be outside the scope of social services. At the local level, the national representation transforms from a problem of poverty and housing provision to an issue of safety and security in public spaces. Similarly, the local translations turn the national introduction of Housing First into a problem of individuals’ ability to retain long-term housing.*

Keywords_ *policy translation, problem representations, structural homelessness, multi-level governance, Housing First, critical policy analysis*

ISSN 2030-2762 / ISSN 2030-3106 online

Introduction

This article examines how homelessness is constructed and translated within Sweden's multi-level governance, focusing on problem representations and their underlying assumptions, including what is left unproblematic. Drawing on the concept of policy *translation* (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), this study investigates how policy ideas travel and are reinterpreted across levels of governance. Specifically, it analyses and compares policy documents on homelessness across the national, regional and municipal levels in Sweden and aims to explore how the problem of homelessness is constructed and translated within different levels of governance, resulting in an avoidance of fiscal responsibility.

To analyse how homelessness is constructed as a policy problem, Bacchi's (2009) *What's the Problem Represented to be?* (WPR) approach is applied in this article. According to Bacchi (2009), policy problems do not exist independently of governance but are produced through policy processes. From this perspective, critically examining how policy language constructs and represents social problems is essential, since particular problem representations shape and delimit the range of policy responses considered possible (Bacchi, 2016).

Focusing on the problem representations of homelessness and the translation of policy between the national and municipal levels, this article contributes to the literature in two ways. Firstly, it extends research on policy translation (e.g. Agago, 2025; Hustad, 2023) to the field of homelessness, an area seldom explored, with a specific focus on its problem representations. Secondly, it contributes to constructivist homelessness research (e.g. Flåto, 2022; Petersson, 2017; Van Loon et al., 2026) by integrating WPR critical policy analysis and extending it to policy translation by analysing how problem representations are interpreted and reshaped within a multi-level governance structure. Combining these two strands of research, this article identifies how socially constructed ideas of homelessness travel across levels of governance.

This article contributes to existing research on how homelessness is problematised in policy, with particular attention given to underlying assumptions regarding its causes and solutions. It further develops existing scholarship by examining how such problem representations are translated from the national to the local level. The study is guided by the following research questions: (i) How is the problem of homelessness represented in Swedish national, regional and local policy documents? (ii) What are the assumptions about homelessness and homeless people that underpin these problem representations? (iii) How are national problem representations translated at regional and municipal levels?

The Swedish homelessness policy context

Sweden's public administration is divided into three levels: national, regional and local. The national government is responsible for pushing forward legislative proposals and implementing decisions made by the Swedish Parliament. The County Administrative Boards[1] act as intermediaries to coordinate local initiatives with national directives to ensure national policy compliance. Municipalities have a constitutional right to self-governance and the ultimate responsibility for ensuring constituents receive the help and the support they need according to 2 c. § 1 of the Swedish Social Services Act (SFS 2025: 400).

In 2001, a governmental report on homelessness (SOU, 2001: 95) based on an extensive body of research was submitted by a public committee appointed by the Swedish Parliament. As recommended by the report, local development projects were funded by the National Board of Health and Welfare[2] (NBHW) to tackle homelessness during 2002–2005 (Benjaminsen & Knutagård, 2016; Dyb et al., 2021). The NBHW launched the first national homelessness strategy, *Homelessness – Many faces, responsibility of many (2007–2009)*, followed by an evaluation report that found the objectives had not been achieved (Denvall et al., 2011). Additionally, the Housing First (HF) model was one of the proposed solutions, but it had not had the same impact as in other Nordic countries (Dyb et al., 2021). After more than a decade of vacuum in national homelessness policy, the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs[3] (MHSW) published a national homeless strategy for 2022–2026 with four major goals: (i) homelessness should be prevented; (ii) no one should reside or live on the street; (iii) the HF method should be introduced nationally; (iv) the social perspective in urban planning should be strengthened (MHSA, 2022).

Among the Nordic countries, Sweden has the highest rate of homelessness per capita (Dyb & Zeiner, 2020; FEANTSA, 2024). The most recent report from the Swedish national survey of homelessness – conducted every seven years – was published in 2024 and showed a decline in the homeless population: a total of 27 380 people over the age of 18 years were identified in NBHW's homelessness situations (NBHW, 2024). However, civil society organisations have criticised the definitions of homelessness used as being too narrow and not representing the entire homeless population (The Swedish City Missions, 2024).

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1 Länsstyrelserna

2 Socialstyrelsen

3 Socialdepartementet

Literature review: Constructivist homelessness and policy translation studies

Across the growing body of constructivist homelessness policy research, a key focus is exploring the various ways in which the problem of homelessness is constructed and represented. As demonstrated in previous research, policy is shaped by discourses and definitions of homelessness (Van Loon et al., 2025), notions of welfare dependency and responsibilisation (Horsell, 2024), epistemic communities (Flåto, 2022) and community narratives surrounding homelessness (Gleason et al., 2024). Discursive constructions of homelessness have also been explored in the Nordic context in recent years (Dyb, 2021; Flåto, 2022; Petersson, 2017; Sahlin, 2020). Flåto (2023) shows that despite all governmental sectors appearing to recognise their responsibility within a social welfare frame, sectoral discourse contributes to differing problem representations. Adopting Bacchi (2009)'s approach to analyse the underlying assumptions underpinning different representations and their real-life effects in three European cities, Petersson (2017) highlights that homelessness is constructed as being a result of individual deficiencies and personal failures rather than addressing broader structural economic factors and intersectional dimensions of discrimination rooted in social structures. While most of the research above examines how the problem of homelessness is framed and constructed within policy discourse, few have critically studied the underlying assumptions of the constructions (e.g. Petersson, 2017) and how these constructions and problematisations are (re)interpreted as they travel between different levels of governance.

Another strand of constructivist homelessness research focuses on public spaces (Addo, 2018; Lundberg et al., 2025; Toolis & Hammack, 2015) and welfare accessibility through outreach work (Grymonprez et al., 2020). Lundberg et al. (2025) show that homeless individuals are discursively constructed as unwanted groups by restricting their presence in public space. Toolis and Hammack (2015) similarly highlight that homeless people are portrayed as a threat to safety and economic vitality to justify criminalisation of homelessness. Such discourses on homelessness have shaped the practice of outreach work. For example, Grymonprez et al. (2020) show that outreach work is increasingly shaped by shifting discourses on welfare accessibility, with access functioning as a form of gatekeeping that requires 'housing readiness' and excludes those deemed not 'ready' in order to safeguard future institutional cooperation. With the increasing relevance of constructivist studies on homelessness, this article will further explore socio-spatial governance of homelessness to understand how policy discourse constructs access to urban environments and welfare through outreach work for homeless people.

Policy translation is often studied in policy studies to explore how transnational or national policy ideas travel to local settings (Agago, 2025; Ball, 2022; Hustad, 2023; Kluczewska & Korneev, 2021; Milhorance et al., 2022), being also seen as an alternative analytical lens to policy transfer (Freeman, 2009; Hassenteufel & Zeigermann, 2021; Mukhtarov, 2014; Stone, 2004). In a Swedish context, studies have investigated policy translation in the fields of civil society (Johansson & Johansson, 2012), health and healthcare (Lindberg & Erlingsdóttir, 2005; Wihlborg, 2016), methadone and family doctor practice (Johnson, 2003) and HF (Hansen Löfstrand, 2012). This article examines how social constructions of homelessness are translated across multiple levels of governance, focusing on how policy ideas are interpreted, adapted, and reshaped as they move between governance contexts.

Theoretical approach

This study applies Carol Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach, which challenges the notion of policy-making as a neutral and rational process. The intention is to reveal the underpinning assumptions, political implications and power dynamics in policy-making (to *interrogate* problems). Within this approach, "public policy is not only expressed in words, but it is literally 'constructed' through the language(s) in which it is described" (Fischer, 2003, p. 43). In conventional approaches to policy analysis, Bacchi (2026, p. 30) describes it as a "problem-solving framework"; policies are assumed to tackle 'pre-existing' social problems, which are seen by their nature as being *exogenous* to (outside of) the realm of governance. Conversely, as a "policy problematising approach" (Bacchi, 2026, p. 30), Bacchi (2009) believes social problems are *endogenous* to (created within) the policy-making process, which implies certain understandings of what needs to be changed by constructing the pre-conditions of social problems. Therefore, policies give shape to social problems, for example by defining the underlying mechanisms of the intended solutions. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) also subscribe to the Foucauldian position that understands discourses as *socially produced forms of knowledge* – discourse (*savoir*) as in the background epistemological and ontological assumptions, and discourses (*connaissance*) as in 'true scientific' knowledge. Taken together, they define the boundaries of *what* can be thought and said about a given social object or practice (Ball, 1991; McHoul & Grace, 1993), shaping how individuals understand themselves in the world. Hence, the language used in policy has a role in constructing worlds, problems and people as governable entities (Dean, 2010). Following this approach, the intention in this paper is to critically reflect on how 'discursive formations' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 36) are constructed through policy language and their material and discursive effects.

Furthermore, this article draws on the *translation perspective* (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) to analyse the travel of ideas on homelessness policy from the national level to the municipal level in the Swedish context as well as how policy ideas change in the course of translation. The concept of *policy transfer* is often associated with the international context, for example coercive *policy diffusion* and voluntary *lesson-drawing* (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Rose, 1993), in which the travel of ideas is viewed more as a rational, mechanistic processes rather than the work of free agents. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996), taking a different approach, draw on Latour's (1984) concept of translation, which they view translation as a complex process by which actors continuously and actively (re)*interpret* and *act upon* an idea to be transformed into different forms and contexts. As Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón (2005, p. 8) suggest, ideas change from one context to another – "to set something into a new place is to construct it anew". The translation perspective assumes that ideas inevitably change in the course of repetitive (re)interpretations and transformations by different actors. In the context of policy translation, instead of questioning *why* policy ideas alter at the local level, the translation perspective is applied as a central concept to understand *how* national policy ideas change and transform as they travel through multiple levels of governance.

The analysis undertaken is informed by three of Bacchi's (2009, p. 2) six questions for WPR analysis: (i) *What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?* (ii) *What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?* (iii) *What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?* By examining and comparing homelessness policies in regional and municipal policy documents, the aim of this paper is to examine how the problem of homelessness is constituted within and translated through different levels of governance.

Methods and materials

This article forms part of a larger doctoral project focusing on how Swedish policy ideas on homelessness are translated from the national to the local level as well as from policy to practice. In this paper, official homeless policy documents were analysed based on the consideration that these documents are "practical texts", which are "written for the purpose of offering rules, opinion, and advice on how to behave as one should" and comprise "the leading edges of governmental problematisation" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 34). The data comprises policy documents from three levels of governance – national, regional and municipal – with the aim being not only to cover broader policy mandates but also to enable problem

representations to be traced from the national to the municipal level to provide an understanding of the transformations of the policy ideas. The selected policy documents are presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Homelessness policy documents analysed

Year	2022–2026	2024	2025–2026
Level of governance	National	Regional	Municipal
Organisation	The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs	The County Administrative Boards	The City of Gothenburg
Policy document	The Swedish National Homelessness strategy 2022–2026 (NHS)	Tackling homelessness – What can a municipality do? (RP)	The Homelessness plan for the City of Gothenburg 2025–2026 (HPG)

The national homelessness strategy was published in 2022, followed by the regional policy in 2024 and the municipal plan in 2025, with both aligned with the goals stated in the national strategy. This article focuses on Gothenburg, Sweden's second-largest city, selected because its two-year plan falls within the implementation period of the national strategy, allowing for analysis of how national goals are incorporated locally.

Document analysis was conducted according to Bowen (2009) as a systematic and iterative procedure that included elements of content and thematic analysis: (i) skimming (superficial examination), (ii) reading (thorough examination) and (iii) interpretation. Guided by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, p. 16), the policy documents were analysed "backwards" to examine and question "their underlying premises". Policy solutions in all three documents were first identified, then a focused re-reading was performed to locate the premises and the constructed problems based on the policy solutions. Several categories were in turn developed based on the characteristics of the solutions to capture the problem representations and underlying assumptions. Repeating this iterative process for each policy document, an overall picture of the policy translation of the problem representations across the three levels of governance was established.

Results: Problem representations and their translation

National problem representations of homelessness

A poverty problem solvable through collaboration between social services and landlords

The Swedish National Homelessness Strategy 2022–2026 (NHS) (MHSA, 2022) states that collaboration between social services and landlords is "a success factor" (NHS, p. 8) in solving the problem of homelessness by preventing evictions. In addition, the County Administrative Boards, the NBHW and the Enforcement Authority[4] are explicitly assigned roles to assist social services in preventing evictions.

> *Not being approved as a tenant is often due to landlords considering the income to be too low or not accepting all types of income, such as social assistance or establishment allowance*. (NHS, p. 8)

In this case, rejections and evictions by landlords of low-income households or households with unaccepted sources of income (from, e.g., social benefits) are represented as the cause of the homelessness problem, through which homelessness is constructed as a poverty problem:

> *Since 2006, Sweden's population has increased faster than housing construction. The accumulated housing shortage grew until 2017 and was estimated in 2022 to amount to just over 180 000 dwellings. […] As a result of both increasing income inequality and rising housing prices during the 2000s, the number of households for which it is difficult to save for owner-occupied housing has also increased. Consequently, the share of households demanding rental housing has risen, while the share of rental dwellings in the national housing stock has decreased*. (NHS, p. 3)

Homelessness is described with regard to the collective term 'households' instead of 'individuals', which presents homelessness as a societal problem caused by structural factors rather than an individual problem for people with certain characteristics. The problem of homelessness is constructed as a structural one, a consequence of widening income inequalities which have resulted in an increasing share of the population not having the economic means to purchase owner-occupied housing or rent an apartment within the regular housing market, combined with rocketing house prices and a shrinking stock of rental housing. Taken together, homelessness is framed as a poverty problem produced by structural economic inequalities, resulting in households with low and unaccepted incomes being excluded from both the owner-occupied and rental housing markets. Collaboration in municipal efforts to prevent evictions is constructed as the appropriate response to this problem repre-

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sentation, as homelessness is understood as an outcome of housing exclusion produced through landlords' practices of rejection and eviction. By locating both the mechanisms producing homelessness and the interventions intended to prevent it at the local level, this representation narrows the range of solutions that appear relevant and legitimate. Rather than addressing the structural conditions identified as underlying homelessness—such as housing shortages, rising housing costs, and insufficient access to affordable housing—the policy response becomes centred on municipal coordination and the prevention of individual households' exclusion from existing housing. In this way, a structural problem representation is translated into a predominantly local and preventive policy response. This discursive shift also redistributes responsibility: from the national government and interventions requiring substantial public investment and political reform, such as state-funded housing production, towards municipalities and local actors expected to manage the consequences of structural housing-market inequalities.

A problem caused by the lack of active participation of social services in urban planning

Besides the structurally oriented representation of homelessness as a poverty problem, there is a representation of homelessness as a problem resulting from a lack of social perspectives in urban and housing provision planning. The national policy proposes that the involvement of social services and social welfare committees in urban and housing provision planning be increased, with national homelessness surveys serving as a knowledge foundation.

> *This [strengthening the social perspective in urban planning] can be achieved by increasing the involvement and participation of social services in housing provision planning, thereby giving the social welfare committee's knowledge of living conditions in the municipality greater scope. The measures in the strategy should be implementable regardless of how the housing market develops during the period and do not require any legislative changes*. (NHS, p. 2)

> *The social welfare committee's knowledge of living conditions in the municipality needs to be given greater scope in municipal urban planning. […] The aim is to enable the social welfare committee to actively prevent and counteract social problems based on its specific expertise*. (NHS, p. 19)

Social welfare committees, particularly social services, are framed as key actors in municipal urban and housing planning to counteract homelessness. In emphasising their knowledge of local living conditions, social services are positioned as responsible for actively preventing and addressing homelessness through a stronger social perspective in urban planning (NHS, p. 19). Homelessness is hence represented as a problem of a lack of social perspectives in urban and housing provision planning.

Homelessness is seen as resulting from both individual and structural causes, as expressed in the following account:

> *The causes of homelessness vary, and different types of interventions are needed to counteract it. Both individually oriented social interventions and structural-level measures are required, for example interventions in the housing market to prevent homelessness*. (NHS, p. 4)

Here, homelessness is represented as a complex social problem with diverse causes, implying that effective responses must combine individually oriented social interventions with structural measures, especially those addressing housing market conditions. This problem representation normalises a dual causal logic in which responsibility is distributed across individuals and societal structures. While this framing legitimises a broad repertoire of policy responses to the problem of homelessness, it risks diluting accountability for structural conditions by positioning individual-level interventions as an equally necessary response, thereby potentially constraining more far-reaching structural change.

Key underlying assumptions in this national representation concern the 'responsibilisation' (Bacchi, 2009) of local social services, which are presented both as central actors and as lacking sufficient knowledge in various policy areas (NHS, p. 8 & 12). Contrarily, responsibility at the national level is presented in more limited terms, being primarily confined to producing continuous homelessness surveys, providing knowledge on outreach work and emergency housing, and encouraging municipalities to implement HF. Thus, the national strategy discursively frames homelessness as a problem of a lack of collaboration and knowledge among local actors. Consequently, possible ways of addressing homelessness are limited to municipal levels, and the national government's fiscal responsibility of addressing the structural conditions contributing to homelessness, i.e. shortage of affordable housing, is left out.

A problem of mental ill health, addiction and distrust towards authorities

A problem representation emerges in the proposal to develop outreach social work to reach individuals experiencing so-called 'acute homelessness', defined here as homeless people who are unwilling to engage with welfare services. In the text, outreach workers are positioned as intermediaries who bridge the gap between reluctant homeless people and the welfare system. Homeless people are described as "sleep[ing] outdoors or in public spaces" and often reluctant to seek assistance due to presumed "distrust towards authorities" (NHS, p. 12). In this way, "acute homelessness" is represented as a problem partly rooted in individuals' reluctance and/or inability to engage with welfare services. The prevalence of substance use and mental health problems among this presumed hard-to-reach category of homeless people is also emphasised, highlighting comorbidity as a prominent

characteristic of this group (NHS, p. 14). Together, these presentations construct homelessness as being primarily a problem of marginalised and hard-to-reach homeless people unwilling to accept help.

Another suggestion in the national policy pertains to the need for improved knowledge on municipal use of emergency housing solutions to combat homelessness. Prolonged and recurring placement in short-term housing is said to cause "lock-in effects, particularly for people with complex social needs" (NHS, p. 13). Emergency housing, such as overnight shelters, is positioned as a temporary solution for people "to find their own dwelling or be granted a long-term housing solution from the social services" (NHS, p. 11). Here, homelessness is represented as a problem of homeless people being 'locked in' to homelessness by short-term housing solutions; it is suggested that these be replaced by long-term solutions to enable the social services to care for the needs of homeless service users and provide them with individualised support and help (NHS, p. 13). Permanent housing coupled with specialised health and social support is stated to be necessary:

> *Having a home of one's own is of central importance for all individuals and is, in many ways, a prerequisite for well-being and participation in society. […] Within the group of homeless individuals, there are often people with complex problems and in significant need of various care and support services in addition to housing. To assist them, more developed methods and approaches are needed.* (NHS, p. 14)

A home – rather than 'housing' – is considered necessary 'for all'. However, to address homelessness among people with "complex needs", HF rather than a home is suggested to be "possibly more effective than usual interventions to reduce homelessness and increase stability in housing" (NHS, p. 15).

> *The Housing First method is an established approach for addressing homelessness among individuals with social problems. The method is based on the idea that people need stable housing in order to address their other problems. It involves offering individuals in acute homelessness housing on the same terms as other tenants. This is then combined with voluntary and individually tailored support services*. (NHS, p. 15)

It is suggested that homeless people with 'social problems' be provided with housing on the same terms as regular tenants in combination with voluntary individualised support (NHS, p. 15). The success story of transferring the HF model from an American to a European context during the early 2000s is re-told. The HF model builds on the central idea that housing should be provided to homeless people without conditions on interventions or treatments, provided with its eight core principles. The problem representation that emerges through these solutions

is one of mental ill health, addiction, and an unwillingness to seek assistance due to a distrust of authorities. Outreach workers are positioned as a bridge between marginalised and hard-to-reach homeless people with mental health and/or addiction issues and welfare services, facilitating the provision of long-term housing solutions under HF.

Through national funding, municipalities are strongly encouraged to start and strengthen their HF programmes and to guarantee that "the model's core principles can be preserved" (NHS, p.16). However, there is no reference made to the documented challenges surrounding the methodologically faithful translation of HF to the local level (Hansen Löfstrand, 2012; Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013; Pleace, 2011; Uhnoo, 2016), leaving the problem of model fidelity unproblematised at the national level. The subtext of the problem representation is that responsibility for effective HF implementation is transferred solely to municipalities, especially in terms of how the method should be integrated into existing working methods and local contexts.

Regional problem representation of homelessness

A problem of 'social' homelessness for social services to solve

Regional policy (RP) (The County Administrative Boards, 2024) targets municipalities within respective regions and aims to provide them with recommendations on how to address homelessness. Unlike national representations, the regional document divides homelessness into 'social' and 'structural' categories:

> *Homelessness is sometimes divided based on its causes, distinguishing between social and structural homelessness. Social homelessness refers to situations where there are underlying issues such as addiction or mental ill health. Structural homelessness means that households, without social problems, are unable to enter the housing market due to factors such as low income or a lack of established networks and contacts*. (RP, p. 4)

A distinction is created between homeless people based on the perceived reasons for their 'homelessness'. 'Social' homelessness is defined as a lack of housing occurring as part of a range of individual problems, including addictions or mental ill health, whereas 'structural' homelessness is defined as a lack of housing occurring due to households lacking the economic means and necessary connections to access the housing market, independent of other social problems. This binary categorisation of homelessness also has practical implications for municipalities.

> *Housing First is an alternative form of support that municipalities can provide instead of the staircase housing model. It is aimed at individuals experiencing homelessness due to social problems. The idea behind the model is that a person without housing first needs a home in order to be able to address other problems*. (RP, p. 6)

The HF model is presented as an alternative to the traditional "staircase model" for homeless people with "social problems", in which access to independent housing typically depends on demonstrating housing readiness, maintaining sobriety, and complying with certain rules while progressing through transitional forms of accommodation (RP, p. 6). However, the regional representation departs from the national representation of HF. Whereas the national representation identifies homeless people with "complex problems" as a key target group for HF, the regional representation constructs only a small proportion of the homeless people as suitable for HF services. This narrowing of eligibility is reinforced by the conditional character of tenure. Homeless people accommodated through HF are not initially granted tenancy rights; instead, a tenancy contract is to be awarded only if "everything goes well" (RP, p. 6). Thus, although HF is presented as an alternative to the staircase model, the regional representation partially reproduces a logic of housing readiness by making both access to HF and secure tenure conditional on assessments of individual suitability and conduct.

Alongside this representation of homelessness in terms of individual "social problems", the regional representation also acknowledges a "structural" form of homelessness, which is explicitly constructed in opposition to "social" homelessness:

> *A growing group among the homeless consists of individuals and households, without social problems, who cannot afford or access housing on the regular housing market. In some municipalities, the support provided by social services is influenced by whether homelessness is categorised as social or structural. Individuals and households experiencing structural homelessness risk falling through the cracks*. (RP, p. 7)

Although "structural" homelessness is acknowledged, responsibility for addressing it is positioned outside the scope of social services. Instead, the housing needs of people experiencing structural homelessness are assigned to long-term municipal housing and urban planning (RP, p. 7). This distinction constructs homelessness as a social services problem only when the lack of housing co-occurs with individual problems, such as mental ill health and/or addiction. By separating "structural" from "social" homelessness, the problem representation thus draws an institutional boundary around social services' responsibility: housing deprivation alone does not warrant intervention by social services, whereas homelessness associated with individual social problems does.

This regional representation rests on the normative division of "social" versus "structural" homelessness, reflecting an assumption of entitlement-based welfare that only those deemed eligible for social assistance, legally or by other means, should have access. This assumption becomes a discursive criterion for not only who can access housing assistance from municipalities but also who is included

within the collective view of the 'problem' of homelessness. This representation leaves the situation for people categorised as structurally homeless, and subsequently excluded from housing assistance, unproblematised. A strong tendency in the document is the use of formulations that neither assign responsibility nor propose solutions, as illustrated below:

> *Many stakeholders are calling for a clearer national housing policy for those who have difficulty entering the housing market, including people experiencing structural homelessness* (RP, p. 7).

Very little is said about working methods on how social services can contribute to local housing and urban planning; instead, national housing policy is demanded in regional policy to address structural homelessness. In sum, unlike the national representation, the regional representation constructs homelessness as a 'social' problem for social services to solve, with the HF providing for a small number of homeless individuals with additional social problems in municipalities implementing HF.

Thus, as the national representations are translated to the regional level, they are reinterpreted and reshaped through locally situated understandings of homelessness, particularly the distinction between "social" and "structural" causes. Despite these shifts in problem representation, however, responsibility for addressing homelessness remains largely located at the municipal level. This translation therefore does not fundamentally redistribute responsibility across levels of governance; rather, it reproduces a governance arrangement in which municipalities are expected to manage both individual and structural manifestations of homelessness. In doing so, it leaves the economic and political responsibility of the national government for addressing structural housing-market conditions through national housing policy reform largely unchallenged.

Municipal problem representations of homelessness

A problem of 'structural' homelessness that is not for social services to solve

Similar to the regional representation, the distinction between social and structural homelessness is presented as a self-evident starting point in the municipal homelessness plan (HPG) (The City of Gothenburg, 2025). Structural homelessness is described as a result of housing production being outpaced by population growth (HPG, p. 9). For structurally homeless people, the municipality is said to fulfil its 'ultimate responsibility' (HPG, p. 25) in providing short-term emergency housing, such as hostels, only in cases in which a homeless person lacks the economic means to meet their immediate housing need. Here the cause of structural homelessness is represented as a problem of economic disadvantage caused by a shortage of housing.

> *The solution to the structural dimension of homelessness is not to be found within social services. Instead, solutions need to be based on the general housing provision. However, active participation by social services in housing planning can be an important measure to counteract structural homelessness in the long term.* (HPG, p. 9)

As stated above, social services reject responsibility for solving structural homelessness, with planning for municipal housing provision with active participation of social services instead claimed as the means to address structural homelessness. Taking the distinction between social and structural homelessness as a starting point, the local document does not present structural homelessness as a problem for social services to solve, instead emphasising that economically disadvantaged people who lack housing can benefit from the active participation of social services in housing provision planning.

A problem of evictions due to a lack of communication with landlords

A strengthened collaboration between social services and housing companies is proposed as a key factor in preventing evictions, allowing tenants to be contacted before an eviction notice reaches social services (HPG, p. 19). Personnel from social services, housing companies, and other actors should also increase their knowledge of eviction processes, including the roles of various actors and authorities and possible interventions to prevent evictions effectively (HPG, p. 18). Social services and landlords are framed as having responsibility for proactively preventing homelessness, particularly among families with children. This solution focuses primarily on families with children, with the document mentioning local increases in evictions despite targeted interventions (HPG, p. 18).

> *To prevent families with children covered by the Settlement Act from being at risk of acute homelessness after their housing period ends, the Urban Development Administration has primarily worked with informational measures in the form of housing introductions and housing advice/housing coaching*. (HPG, p. 23)

Specialised housing coaching is offered to newly arrived migrant families to prevent homelessness. With reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, families with children are presented as a priority group among those at risk of eviction. Preventive interventions for individuals with mental ill health have been abolished (HPG, 19), with a general housing advisory instead provided by a variety of actors to a broader target group. The problem of homelessness is represented to be the result of a lack of collaboration and communication in eviction prevention between social services and landlords and a lack of guidance for households at risk of eviction. Strengthened collaboration between the social services and landlords,

alongside specialised housing coaching, is proposed as a solution to address the eviction of families with children, whereas collaboration with the healthcare sector is seen as a solution to support individuals with mental ill health at risk of eviction.

A problem of mental ill health, addiction and inability to retain long-term housing

A recurring theme is homelessness being constructed primarily as an individual problem related to mental ill health, addiction and an inability to retain long-term housing. Those in the category of "long-term acute homeless people" are singled out and their reluctance and/or inability to seek help linked to a presumed "distrust towards authorities" and/or "cognitive disabilities" (HPG, p. 26). Mental ill health and substance abuse are stated to be prevalent among this group, as is an inability to move on to long-term housing:

> *Existing interventions within supported social housing need to be developed to meet the needs of individuals who have difficulties moving on to long-term housing solutions*. (HPG, p. 28)

> *Many of those who remain in long-term acute homelessness have a known history of harmful use of alcohol and/or drugs, often alongside mental ill health. Being able to access healthcare at the early stage is often a prerequisite for moving on to a long-term housing solution*. (HPG, p. 29)

While long-term housing is recognised as an appropriate solution, individuals experiencing 'long-term acute homelessness', particularly those with addiction and/or mental health problems, are portrayed as less able to move on to more stable and long-term housing solutions (HPG, p. 28), often resulting in them remaining in emergency or temporary housing. The policy further emphasises that early contact with healthcare services is frequently a prerequisite for people with complex problems to access more stable housing (HPG, p. 29). Unlike the national representation of homeless people as 'locked in' to emergency housing and in need of long-term housing, the local representation constructs homelessness as a condition associated with complex medical needs that hinder individuals' ability to move on to long-term housing. At the same time, the local problematisation medicalises homelessness by presenting it as a health condition requiring medical care, which can be interpreted as an expression of medicalisation (Hansen Löfstrand, 2012; Lyon-Callo, 2000) rather than just a condition of exclusion from housing. With this problem representation, outreach work, alongside overnight shelters for homeless people, is presented as a solution for connecting hard-to-reach homeless people with the healthcare and welfare services (HPG, p. 26).

Furthermore, HF is described as a proven method of support for homeless people with 'social problems' (HPG, p. 30). However, HF is only presented as an 'alternative' to other forms of supported social housing, such as emergency shelters, based on individuals' circumstances (HPG, p. 30).

> *For individuals who have lived in homelessness for a long time and are struggling with social problems, such as substance abuse or mental ill health, the path to obtaining a first-hand contract on the regular housing market is often very difficult. There is often a need for various care and support interventions in addition to housing, and more developed methods and approaches are required. The Housing First method is an established approach to counteracting homelessness among individuals with social problems.* (HPG, p. 30)

The local implementation of HF does not come as a surprise; what does is the proposal to expand HF to incorporate more target groups, i.e., victims of domestic violence and people with previous addiction problems (HPG, p. 30-31); meanwhile, only some of the original target group – homeless people with mental ill health and addiction – are described as 'suitable' for HF. The expansion of HF is seemingly justified on the grounds that the new target groups can "minimise disturbance and situations that negatively affect neighbours" (HPG, p. 33). The local policy emphasises the prevalence of mental health and addiction problems among those experiencing prolonged periods of homelessness and their inability to live independently. Here homelessness is thus represented as a problem of mental ill health, addiction and an inability to retain long-term housing.

A sub-category of the hard-to-reach homeless people stands out in the policy text, which corresponds with 'extreme case formulations' (Pomerantz, 1986) to justify and legitimate the policy:

> *Among many people experiencing long-term acute homelessness, there is distrust and fear of authorities, sometimes with paranoid elements, which prevents them from approaching social service offices. Within this group, there are also individuals with cognitive impairments and thus impairments in executive functioning […] Some have difficulty understanding and following instructions, which leads to them missing scheduled appointments at social service offices or not understanding why they need to answer questions and submit documents. Some have difficulties with emotional regulation and therefore come into conflict with social workers*. (HPG, p. 27)

The policy text positions 'long-term acute homeless people' as deviant and unstable through references to emotional dysregulation, paranoia and conflict-seeking, while downplaying institutional demands placed on clients. Homelessness is thereby represented as rooted in individuals' unwillingness or inability to seek

institutional support and in their psychological or behavioural problems. The proposed response is referral to healthcare and civil society organisations rather than positioning social services as the sole responsible actor. In line with Grymonprez et al. (2020), this representation reproduces a logic of 'housing readiness', whereby access to welfare services becomes conditional on individuals' capacity to meet institutional expectations.

The underlying assumption rests on homeless people's 'ability to retain long-term housing', allowing them to transit from emergency solutions to long-term housing and eventually take over a first-hand contract. In this case, drawing on the concept of 'creaming' (Lipsky, 1980), instead of offering HF flats to 'extreme cases' within the core target group as established in research, those being individuals with mental health and addiction problems, the policy instead introduces HF to other comparatively less complex groups, such as people with previous addiction problems.

The assumption of 'ability to retain long-term housing' also reflects a strong resemblance to the logic underpinning the 'staircase' model, namely that homeless people need to prove that they have the necessary skills to live independently, contrary to the principle of HF (immediately providing housing with tenure rights unconditionally). Thus, it is plain that the work logic of HF collides with the 'staircase' model in practice, transforming Housing First into 'Housing Last' (e.g. Lindwall, 2024), leaving the method fidelity of the HF programme unproblematised in this representation.

A problem of safety and security in public spaces

Local policy proposes that social services' knowledge on living conditions and social exclusion be integrated in urban development projects (HPG, p. 36). City planning committees[5] are presented as lacking social knowledge on working with "people with addiction" in particular, focusing on their use of public spaces (HPG, p. 36). The proposed policy response emphasises 'location-based collaboration' among social services, civil society organisations and property owners, alongside outreach work. Its goal is to "identify places where socially excluded groups gather and create general strategies to ensure safety in the public spaces" (HPG, p. 38). Here, homelessness is constructed less as an issue of social knowledge informing housing planning, and more as a matter of social disturbances manifested in the presence of marginalised groups in public spaces, generating insecurity for the general public:

> *Collaboration between social welfare administrations and civil society organisations is important to ensure that no one sleeps outdoors and to increase safety in the city.* (HPG, p. 29)

5 Stadsbyggnadsnämnden, stadsmiljönämnden and exploateringsnämnden

> *Thus, it concerns both social interventions and measures in the physical environment. The City of Gothenburg's safety-promoting and crime-preventive programme 2022–2026 states that safety-promoting and crime-preventive aspects need to be considered to a greater extent in physical planning in urban development*. (HPG, p. 38)

As outlined above, social interventions – safety-promoting and crime-prevention aspects – are described as needing to be strengthened in physical urban planning. Rather than primarily a question of living conditions and housing provision, homelessness is locally rearticulated as a problem of public safety and urban order. Through this representation, and in accordance with the concept "production of places" (Bacchi, 2026, p. 21), public space is discursively constructed as a place in which the safety of the public is threatened by homeless individuals, while the policy explicitly acknowledges that the proposed measures do not address homelessness, but instead focus on long-term housing planning:

> *Efforts to strengthen collaboration with social welfare administrations in the development of the existing city and new areas are not directly linked to the goals of reducing homelessness, even though there are connections to housing provision in the longer term*. (HPG, p. 37)

Nevertheless, very little is said about the involvement of social services in *housing provision planning* in the proposed policy, with specific reference made only to *urban planning* of the physical environment to ensure safety in public spaces (HPG, p. 38). In the previous local representation, it is claimed that structural homelessness is solvable through the active involvement of social services in housing provision planning; nevertheless, there is no mention of how social perspectives should be integrated in housing provision. Instead, measures and interventions are proposed with the explicit purpose "to increase effectiveness and benefits in the local area" (HPG, p. 37). The underlying assumption is therefore ultimately to safeguard the local area and the public spaces, rather than addressing homelessness. This narrative resonates with previous research highlighting how the City of Gothenburg's "soft exclusion" of homeless people from certain public spaces serves to "sanitise" areas for customer-friendly purposes (Thörn, 2011). This representation narrows the range of possible responses to structural homelessness. The need to provide housing for people experiencing homelessness in public spaces is not constructed as part of the homelessness problem and, consequently, housing provision does not emerge as a relevant policy response. Instead, the problem is confined to the presence of homeless people in public space and how that presence should be managed. In this way, the representation shifts attention away from the municipality's responsibility for housing provision and limits its fiscal responsibility for addressing the structural conditions producing homelessness.

Concluding discussion

This article has explored how homelessness is problematised and translated across national, regional and municipal levels of governance in Sweden by critically examining the problem representations constructed in homelessness policy documents.

This article shows that, at the national level, homelessness is problematised as an outcome of structural poverty, where the 'problem' is represented as residing in economic marginalisation that produces housing exclusion, as landlords are positioned as rejecting and evicting individuals with insufficient or inadequate forms of income. This problem is said to be solvable through strengthened collaboration between social services and landlords. Furthermore, homelessness is constructed as a problem resulting from a lack of social knowledge in urban development committees and insufficient involvement of social services in urban planning. More specifically, social services' knowledge of social living conditions is said to contribute to identifying the housing needs of the economically disadvantaged population and improving planning of housing provision. Homelessness is represented as a complex problem of mental ill health, addiction and distrust towards authorities, described as prevalent among hard-to-reach homeless people. Outreach work, together with the national introduction of HF, is presented as the solution to combat homelessness among this category of people.

In regional policy, homelessness is represented as either a 'social' or 'structural' problem, with only 'social' homelessness stated to be a problem for social services to solve. For individuals with co-occurring social problems, such as mental ill health and addiction, HF and the 'staircase' model are suggested as parallel solutions. Meanwhile, for households or individuals who only lack the economic means to access the housing market, no concrete solutions are provided to fulfil their housing needs.

At the municipal level, taking the division of 'social versus structural' homelessness as an evident starting point, the 'structural' problem is represented as beyond the scope of social services, which means that economically disadvantaged individuals lacking a home might end up in limbo. Alternatively, homelessness is constructed as an eviction problem, particularly for families with children, which, alongside housing coaching, is said to be solvable through enhanced communication between social services and landlords. Homelessness is also represented as a problem of mental ill health, addiction and an inability to retain long-term housing. Collaboration with the healthcare sector is specifically presented as a solution for hard-to-reach homeless people with mental health and addiction issues who are incapable of independent living; meanwhile HF is described as more 'suitable' for those who can live independently in long-term housing and minimise disturbance to neighbours. Last but not least, homelessness is represented as a problem of safety and security

in public spaces; rather than taking a social perspective on housing provision planning, managing the presence of marginalised substance users and socially excluded groups in public spaces to ensure safety for the general public is presented as a solution to tackle 'homelessness'.

Table 2. Problem representation across different levels of governance

Level	Problem representation
National	A poverty problem solvable through collaboration between social services and landlords
	A problem caused by a lack of active participation of social services in urban planning
	A problem of mental ill health, addiction and distrust towards authorities
Regional	A problem of 'social' homelessness for social services to solve
Municipal	A problem of 'structural' homelessness that is not for social services to solve
	A problem of evictions due to a lack of communication with landlords
	A problem of mental ill health, addiction and inability to retain long-term housing
	A problem of safety and security in public spaces

An important finding in terms of policy translation is that the national representation of homelessness transforms from a problem of poverty and housing planning to a problem of safety and security in public spaces at the local level. Attempts at the national level to address homelessness as a problem of poverty and housing provision, "including social perspectives in housing provision planning", are missing in the policy translation at the regional and municipal levels. Instead, the normative distinction between 'social' and 'structural' homelessness is evident at the regional and municipal levels in the presentation of 'structural' homelessness as a problem beyond the scope of social services. At the local level, the only proposal that addresses homelessness as a structural problem – establishing a clear role for social services in housing planning – evaporates during policy translation, with the solution to structural homelessness instead rendered an issue of managing homeless people in public spaces.

A recurring problem in representation at all levels is homelessness as an individual-level problem of mental ill health and addiction to be solved through the implementation of HF. While at the national level HF is explicitly recommended for individuals experiencing long-term homelessness alongside mental ill health and addiction, the regional level provides a slightly different construction of HF, which is cast as a possible alternative to the 'staircase' model for so-called 'socially homeless'. In addition, the regional document highlights that HF only covers a small number of people in municipalities implementing the method, while some municipalities only provide second-hand contracts to HF tenants. At the municipal level, rather than targeting all homeless individuals with mental health

and addiction problems, some homeless people are portrayed as having difficulties transitioning to long-term housing, and in such cases contact with the healthcare is instead presented as a solution.

By adopting the national representations, national solutions in housing provision are left unproblematised. The role of municipal housing companies is notably absent in the problem representations, taking social responsibility off municipal housing companies – whose stated aim *used to* be to provide 'good rental housing for all regardless of background'. Together with the lack of national efforts to create incentives for private housing companies to provide affordable housing, the national representations have made a national public housing policy unthinkable. Drawing on Matland's (1995) concept "symbolic implementation", with a high level of ambiguity and conflict in policy, the national homelessness policy functions to affirm new goals, values and principles, while still reinforcing municipalities' responsibility for addressing homelessness, and without increasing the national government's fiscal responsibility for public housing reform.

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