
Housing the Vulnerable: Municipal Strategies in the Swedish Housing Regime

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- **Abstract**_ The Swedish unitary housing regime entails that everybody should be included on the regular housing market and that there should be no housing reserved for vulnerable households. However, this regime presupposes certain additional measures such as municipal social contracts and priority in housing queues. Moreover, municipal housing companies are expected to play a larger role in housing the vulnerable than other lessors, although they formally do not belong to a social housing sector. This study describes the strategies of six Swedish municipalities to house the vulnerable. Most measures taken by municipalities in this study are in line with the unitary housing regime. However, the present tight housing market has put strategies under considerable pressure in some localities. This has resulted in restrictions of eligibility for various complementary solutions and the introduction of avoidance strategies. Alternative solutions such as an increased municipal housing ownership outside the traditional municipal housing companies are limited. The study might be of interest also to readers from other European countries, as it highlights the strengths and weaknesses of strategies within a unitary housing regime where the ideal is ‘good housing for all’ and there is no de jure social housing.
- **Keywords**_ *social policy, housing provision, permanent housing, unitary housing regime, Sweden*

Introduction

Housing market access problems for households on lower incomes have been a reality in Sweden for decades due to high purchase prices and limited access to rental housing, especially in the lower market segments (Lind, 2014). The need for affordable housing¹ has also increased through a substantial influx of households with limited possibilities on the Swedish job market. Households with a limited budget and often other difficulties such as a history of debt, payment default, dependence on social transfers, or deficient housing references, have major difficulties in solving their housing needs without assistance from the social services.

The latest national survey on homelessness counted 33 000 adults (Socialstyrelsen, 2017). However, the survey did not encompass all municipalities and only provides an on-the-spot account of the persons known to social services or certain charities during one specific week that year. The total amount of adults and children that are homeless, live under uncertain circumstances, or in deficient housing is currently unknown. Some municipalities do regular homelessness counts but face the same methodological problems as the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen). Only 13 percent of municipalities have developed homelessness strategies (Wirehag, 2019). At present, no systematic follow-up of overcrowding and housing standards is made. However, only a minority of the homeless population sleep on the streets. Almost half of the people experiencing homelessness counted in 2017 lived within “the secondary housing market” where the municipality guarantees the fulfilment of the rental contract. The municipalities are currently one of the major lessors in Sweden due to the extent of these municipal social contracts (Boverket, 2020). Wirehag (2019) notes that homelessness is no longer concentrated in the larger cities but has spread throughout the country.

Traditionally, adults with addictions and/or mental disorders have been the major groups in homelessness. These persons have, in most cases, a right to support according to the Social Services Act, a right that also includes housing. The number of homeless with other backgrounds have increased in recent years, for example, elderly without social problems and women that are victims of violence in the family. These groups are also entitled to housing assistance to some extent. However, the National Board of Health and Welfare shows that the greatest increase in homelessness is in reference to so called ‘structural homelessness’, that is households that do not have any outspoken social problems, but a strained economic situation

¹ Affordable housing has been defined as housing with “acceptable relationships between household income and expenditure on housing costs for housing market participants” (Worthington, 2012, p.235) and housing that is not “expensive relative to its fundamental costs of production” (Glaeser and Gyourko, 2003, p.21).

(Socialstyrelsen, 2017). Migration is also a decisive factor in changing homelessness patterns (Hermans et al., 2020). The use of acute housing solutions and other temporary accommodation has increased substantially over a number of years. The extent and form of municipal assistance that these households receive varies among municipalities. A revision of the implementation of the Social Services Act is now being made in a number of municipalities. This is made against a backdrop of increasing costs and budget deficits in social services (SKL, 2019).

Most Swedish municipalities do not have an up-to-date plan for preventing homelessness and there is no national strategy to prevent and reduce homelessness (Anderberg and Dahlberg, 2019). However, many municipalities work actively to find a solution when households in or on the verge of homelessness approach social services. An integration of the regular housing market is usually seen as the ideal solution, but with a strained housing market situation, this is not so easily attained. This paper describes and discusses the strategies of six Swedish municipalities to integrate homeless households into the regular housing market. Directly related to the integration of selected households is also the exclusion of households not deemed to be in acute need. Several studies have analysed the current development of Swedish homelessness and discussed its causes (for example, Anderberg and Dahlberg, 2019; Wirehag, 2019; Hermans et al., 2020; Sahlin, 2020). However, to the knowledge of the author, the ideals under the unitary housing regime and the reality of vulnerable households' access to the regular housing supply have not been contrasted and studied in detail in recent years. This article is an attempt to close part of this gap. The results will also be of interest to readers from other countries, as it highlights the strengths and weaknesses of strategies within a unitary housing regime where the ideal is 'good housing for all' and there is no *de jure* social housing.

The data in this study was extracted through a traditional multiple case study of six Swedish municipalities. The case study comprised a document study and reading of secondary literature, as well as interviews. The document study comprised municipal housing provision plans, new-build strategies, annual reports of municipal housing companies, homelessness reports, municipal policy documents and outcome reports related to social provision of housing, official statistics as well as reports and investigations commissioned by the Swedish state, and the interest organisation of municipalities and regions (SKL/SKR). Seventeen interviews were conducted between October 2019 and January 2020 consisting of one or two representatives each from the participating municipalities' social welfare departments, property management departments, and municipal housing companies. Municipal housing companies were included as they were interpreted as the main tool of the municipality to fulfil social aims. The data was verified by the interviewees during the spring of 2020.

Case studies are useful “to examine a small number of empirical cases holistically to grasp the causal processes leading to observed similarities and differences” (Pickvance, 2001, p.15). In this paper, the cases are the strategies of two municipalities based in the larger metropolitan areas (Gothenburg and Lidingö), two regional centres (Jönköping and Norrköping), and two smaller more peripheral municipalities (Filipstad and Säter). The basic features of the chosen cases are outlined in Table 1. Besides choosing cases of a variety of sizes in different parts of the country and of different wealth compared to the Swedish average, a strategic sampling or information-oriented selection was made (Flyvbjerg, 2006), based on expectations regarding information content and maximising information utility in small samples. Thomas (2011, p.515) suggests that case studies are “about discovering and testing tools of explanation”. However, as case studies are delimited in space and time, generalisability is limited accordingly.

Table 1. Description of the cases

	Inhabitants	Location and character	Median income (SEK)
Sweden	10230185		328700
Gothenburg	571868	The second largest city of Sweden	326300
Lidingö	47818	Adjacent to the capital of Stockholm	403400
Norrköping	141676	Regional centre in the east	313500
Jönköping	139222	Regional centre in the south	332700
Filipstad	10837	Less populated area in the mid-west	287900
Säter	11123	Less populated area in mid-Sweden	331300

Sources: Statistics Sweden 2019a and 2019b.

1 SEK is approximately equivalent to 0,1 EUR.

The article is structured as follows: First, a background describing the Swedish housing regime as well as responsibilities and classifications of municipalities related to homelessness and housing are briefly described. Second, strategies adopted by the six municipalities to house vulnerable households are outlined, and third, the main pathways to housing are analysed and discussed. Last, conclusions are drawn.

Housing Provision, Legal Responsibilities and the Identification of Homeless Households

Below, the link between Swedish housing provision, the legal responsibilities of municipalities to house vulnerable households, as well as recent developments in the procedures of the identification of homeless households will be explored as a background to the study of the six municipalities.

Housing provision

The set of fundamental principles according to which housing provision operates in some defined area (municipality, region, state) at a particular point in time might be referred to as a housing regime (Ruonavaara, 2020). The Swedish housing regime has been defined as having a 'unitary social rental market', that is a rental market where private and public property owners compete on equal terms, as opposed to dual markets where the private rental sector operates mainly on market terms, while the public rental sector is highly regulated (Kemeny, 2001). There is no social housing or other long-term housing to which access is means tested (Bengtsson et al., 2013). The Swedish unitary housing regime is meant to serve all types of households and societal groups with the aim of social inclusion (Grander, 2017), although the functionality of the model has been questioned (Stephens, 2020). However, the functioning of the unitary housing market presupposes certain selective measures such as housing allowances, municipal social contracts, and investment subsidies (Bengtsson, 2017). Priority in housing queues might also be classified as a selective measure (Granath Hansson, 2020). In general, the State and municipalities make restrictive assessments of what households are to get preferential treatment on the housing market, and some measures are temporary as they are envisaged to be a bridge to a better situation when the household can manage without support. The vision is that as many households as possible shall manage on their own in the housing market.

Municipal housing companies previously led the rental market, but after a decline in its historical market dominance and legislative changes in 2011, its leading role has been weakened. As municipal housing companies are now expected to act on market-like terms, they have no explicit role as providers for weaker households (Lind, 2014; Grander, 2017). In some international literature, the stock of Swedish municipal housing companies is labelled social housing² (Scanlon et al., 2014), but this is contested by Swedish agents with reference to the unitary housing regime. However, many municipal housing companies take on a larger responsibility for disadvantaged groups compared to other types of property owners (Grander, 2017; Borg, 2018). Municipal housing companies have also been the main vehicle for housing refugees after 2015 (SABO, 2018). In international comparisons, such policy has been referred to as 'de facto' social housing (Droste and Knorr-Siedow,

² Social housing might be defined as a system that fulfils the following criteria: "(1) The target group for social housing is households with limited financial resources. To make sure that the housing provided is occupied by the target group, a distribution system with that aim has to be in place. Moreover, housing must be provided long term, rather than temporary. (2) Social housing systems provide below-market rents or prices and hence are not self-supporting, but need some form of public or private financial contribution (subsidy)" (Granath Hansson and Lundgren, 2018, p.14).

2014), as it fulfils the same tasks as a regulated social housing sector, although it is not subject to regulations. Municipal housing companies own 27 percent of multi-family housing (Statistics Sweden, 2020). In addition to municipal housing companies, many municipalities also own a limited number of dwellings solely used for social purposes.

Access to housing and legal responsibilities

The two main reasons behind exclusion from the regular housing market are housing cost and housing access problems (Eekhoff, 2002). The people experiencing homelessness identified by Swedish social services face both these problems simultaneously. As most households have no or very limited income from employment, the housing cost problem is usually solved through various forms of benefits and/or municipal guarantees. The housing access problem is usually overcome through allocation of municipal housing or municipal intermediation and guarantees.

As outlined above, Sweden has a tradition of a unitary housing regime without a designated social housing stock. The availability of housing for social purposes is therefore directly linked to conditions on the regular housing market. A limited housing supply leads to prioritisation among groups. Vulnerable households are often said to come last in the queue, but as there are vehicles used by social services to gain priority to the regular housing supply, this does not apply in all geographies and at all times. Political will and considerations related to the balance between social needs and needs of households trying to directly access the regular housing market are often key to outcome. Threshold groups not deemed in need by social services, but with great difficulties on the housing market, have been identified as the real losers on the Swedish housing market today (Grander, 2017). Especially households that are dependent on benefits for their living and/or have a history of debt, payment default, or deficient housing references face major access problems, even in relation to municipal housing companies.

As in many other countries, the Swedish State has the responsibility for legal regulation and housing subsidies, while municipalities have the main responsibility for implementation of housing policy. Three laws regulate municipal responsibility related to housing provision: the Housing Provision Act (Bostadsförsörjningslagen), the Social Services Act (Socialtjänstlagen) and the Settlement Act (Bosättningslagen). The Housing Provision Act entails a general responsibility to plan for housing provision for all citizens of the municipality but does not include any specific municipal responsibility for certain groups of households. However, since 2014 the law includes an obligation to, among other things, include the housing needs of

'special groups'³ in housing provision analysis. The Social Services Act and the Settlement Act entail a direct municipal responsibility for certain households. The Social Services Act (SoL) does not entail a specified right to housing for the citizens, but elderly and disabled persons are explicitly mentioned as groups that the municipality has to arrange housing for. Further, the right to assistance toward a reasonable standard of living might include housing. Municipalities can also give additional assistance, also towards housing, in cases of special circumstances. The resulting housing solutions offered vary between municipalities. The Settlement Act concerns newly arrived immigrants that have been assigned to a municipality according to the state fair share programme introduced in 2016. It should be noted that households assigned under the fair share programme constitutes a minority of immigrant households arriving in Sweden, as there is also the choice for households to arrange their own accommodation, which is the preferred alternative by a majority. There is an on-going process of reducing this right in areas with larger concentrations of immigrant populations, which might increase the significance of the Settlement Act. Municipal housing companies have played a key role in housing immigrants according to the Settlement Act (SABO, 2018).

New considerations when defining homelessness

The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare define a person experiencing homelessness as an adult who 1) sleeps on the street or in emergency accommodation, 2) will soon be leaving a hospital or a prison, but do not have a home to go to, 3) lives on a social tenancy with special conditions and/or supervision, or 4) lives on temporary and unsecure terms with other private persons and have been in contact with social services or charities concerning this situation (Socialstyrelsen, 2017). In relation to the ETHOS typology, it has been described as largely coinciding (Anderberg and Dahlberg, 2019) or a narrower adaptation (Wirehag, 2019).

In their latest homelessness report, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare indicates that 20 percent of the counted people experiencing homelessness do not have any needs in addition to housing that require support, assistance, or treatment (Socialstyrelsen, 2017). The increase in homelessness in recent years is largely connected to this group. The terms 'social homelessness' and 'structural homelessness' have gained certain ground and are subjects of discussion. 'Social homelessness' is described as homelessness that hits persons that have a right to support under the Social Services Act, that is mainly persons suffering from addic-

³ The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning explains that 'special groups' are those that, for different reasons, have difficulties in getting established in the housing market. Groups pointed out are elderly and disabled persons in need of adapted housing solutions, newly-arrived immigrants, people living in over-crowded housing, and people experiencing homelessness (Boverket, 2021).

tions and/or psychosocial ill health or are exposed to violence in the family. 'Structural homelessness' is described as homelessness affecting persons that do not have any traditional social problems, but that have limited financial capacity, for example, due to low income, payment defaults, and debt. In the directives of a state inquiry, 'structural homelessness' is defined as a situation that affects "households without social problems that turn to social services for help with their housing situation" (Regeringen, 2020, p. 1). The terms have been criticised since it is difficult to draw a sharp line between 'social' and 'structural' homelessness and 'structural' homelessness has a tendency to turn into 'social' homelessness when it last longer. However, when it comes to 'structural homelessness', some municipalities have voiced a need for a term that describes this relatively new phenomenon on the Swedish housing market that has grown over the last decade and in some municipalities includes a substantial number of households. The assessment of whether these households have a right to assistance, according to the law, have also been a subject of discussion and has led to a clarification of aid assessment in a number of municipalities. In this paper, both terms are used to understand the different housing paths these two classifications entail. For a discussion on categorisations, see Sahlin (2020).

Strategies Adopted by the Studied Municipalities

In this section, first the characteristics of homelessness in the six studied municipalities are described along with municipal strategies for housing pathways of households. Second, the three main support alternatives are outlined: access to the regular housing supply, municipal social contracts, and support in the search for housing.

Homelessness and main housing pathways

It is well documented both in academic and policy papers that mapping homelessness comes with many methodological problems (for example Socialstyrelsen, 2017; SOU, 2018; Wirehag, 2019; Boverket, 2020). In Sweden, the National Board of Health and Welfare carries out national homelessness surveys every six years. Some municipalities complement these studies with their own surveys at closer intervals. However, not all municipalities adhere to the same methodology or map the same groups as the National Board of Health and Welfare, which compromises comparability. The need for better statistics has been brought up in state investigations and by charities (SOU 2018; Stadsmissionen, 2019). There is on-going work to increase knowledge on housing shortages in general, in which vulnerable groups are especially highlighted, although it is difficult to catch diffuse groups such as the

'structurally homeless' (Boverkett, 2020). As a result, it is not possible to make a quantitative comparison of homelessness in the included municipalities. However, some common traits and some discrepancies are noted.

Apart from the obligatory provision of adjusted housing for the elderly and disabled, five groups of households are receiving assistance related to housing in all municipalities: 1) households suffering from problematic substance use, and/or 2) psychosocial illness, 3) persons that are victims of violence within the family, 4) households that have been assigned to the municipality under the Settlement Act on newly arrived immigrants, and 5) lone immigrant minors. However, the length of the assistance and the kind of assistance vary a lot amongst the municipalities.

People experiencing street homelessness are rare in all municipalities included in the study. A majority of households included in homelessness statistics live in some sort of housing solution arranged by the municipality. All municipalities have their own or bought housing and care solutions for the traditional target groups of households affected by problematic drug use and/or psychosocial illness. Housing solutions for these groups are usually connected to care and last as long as the household is deemed in need of such care. Housing First is only applied by the largest municipality. In some municipalities, municipal social contracts might be converted to regular rental contracts once the care has ended. The number of persons that are victims of violence in the family is growing in all municipalities except the smallest one. Short- and mid-term solutions in the form of shelter or protected housing is offered in all municipalities, but the difficulty of arranging long-term solutions is pointed out by several municipalities.

The number of newly arrived immigrants varies significantly over the years, as does the composition of households. This entails difficulties in planning for short and most notably long-term housing for these groups. According to the Settlement Act of 2016, municipalities have to house a certain number of immigrants set by the State each year. However, municipalities have interpreted the act differently and solutions offered vary significantly. In some municipalities immigrants are provided with regular apartments in the municipal or private housing stock, sometimes with an indefinite contract and sometimes with a municipal guarantee for a certain period, where after the contract can be normalised and then runs indefinitely. In other municipalities contracts have a time limit between two and five years. Thereafter, households are expected to enter the regular housing market on their own merits. Housing solutions are, according to the Act, to be situated in the regular housing stock as far as this is possible. This requirement is met by most municipalities, but in one temporary housing in adjusted commercial premises are used.

A sixth group that has previously received assistance in all municipalities where there has been a need (typically in the four larger ones) is the so-called 'structurally homeless' group. In three of the largest municipalities, the difference between people experiencing social and structural homelessness and the difference between them when it comes to municipal responsibility has led to policy change in recent years. In the 2019 homelessness mapping of Gothenburg, 48 percent of all persons and 30 percent of all households were deemed structurally homeless. Seventy two percent of households with children are deemed to belong to this group. According to the new housing policy implemented in 2019, these households shall no longer receive assistance to housing, but, if needed, short-term monetary assistance to buy shelter or sometimes direct shelter, as well as support in the search for housing. In Lidingö, monetary assistance and support in the search for housing is also offered. Norrköping offers short-term monetary assistance for shelter solutions. In Jönköping, the structurally homeless are still given assistance to housing under certain circumstances, but as the municipality has increasing difficulties in finding such housing, a discussion regarding this policy has emerged. The two smaller municipalities have not identified any 'structurally homeless' and were unfamiliar with the term.

Housing assistance is given short-term (from one night to some months), medium-term (for two to five years), and long-term (access to the regular housing market). Below, the different alternatives that might lead to inclusion on the regular housing market are described.

Direct access to the regular housing supply

In all the studied municipalities, direct access to the regular housing supply is seen as the preferred alternative, as it is deemed socially desirable to normalise the living conditions of the households. Moreover, it also reduces municipal administration and costs. Rents in regular housing are usually lower than in alternative housing solutions arranged by the municipality and households often pay their rents from benefits. Households might then also receive state financed housing benefits.

In the two smaller municipalities included in this study, vulnerable households are to a large extent given access to the regular housing market through relatively generous letting policies in municipal housing companies and priority in their housing queues. No distinctions are made between groups. The smallest municipality gives newly-arrived immigrants assigned under the Settlement Act direct access to indefinite lease contracts with the municipal housing company. The other small municipality does not receive any assignments as it has previously received substantial amounts of immigrants and is struggling with its social cohesion. However, self-settled immigrants and vulnerable households get direct access to the local housing market as there are vacancies.

In the four larger municipalities, letting policies have been relaxed in recent years, which mainly allows for a wider range of benefits to be accepted as income. This makes it possible for more households to apply for a wider range of housing in municipal housing companies. Priority is also given in municipal housing companies under certain circumstances, but more restrictively than previously. One municipality applied state sponsored municipal housing benefits to assist households to enter the regular housing market. Gothenburg is the municipality in Sweden with the largest amount of Housing First apartments. No other municipality included in this study applies Housing First. Despite the above-mentioned measures, many households have housing market access problems.

The tension between the regular housing market and social needs are apparent in the four larger municipalities (Table 2). Vacancy rates are close to nil and average waiting times for an apartment amount to years. This applies both to municipalities with large rental and municipal housing stocks and to the one municipality with a limited share of rental and municipal housing. More generous letting policies have been applied in some municipalities to increase access potential for more households in this strained situation. The growing restrictiveness of given priority in housing queues should also be seen in this light. However, time limited municipal social contracts are used quite extensively, as will be outlined in the next section.

Table 2. Housing market characteristics of the six municipalities

	Gothenburg	Lidingö	Jönköping	Norrköping	Säter	Filipstad
Vacancy rate (%)	0	0	0	1	0	Growing*
Average housing queue (years)	5	n/a	2-3	4-5	1	0
Rental housing share of housing stock (%)	>50	>25	44	50	>25?	>40?
Municipal share of rental housing	Very large	Small Social	Large	Large	Very large	Very large
Letting policy of municipal housing companies	Generous	n/a	Generous	Generous	Generous	Generous?
Housing construction	Relatively large	Limited	Relatively large	Relatively large	Limited	Single family housing

*In municipal housing companies or foundations.

Sources: Municipal housing policy documents and annual reports of municipal housing companies

Municipal social contracts

Municipal social contracts are rental agreements supported by the municipality to enhance the credit worthiness of the household and secure the observance of other contractual arrangements toward the property owner, usually connected to care of the property and avoidance of disturbances in relation to neighbours. Security of

tenure is always removed through a separate contract. However, the removal of security of tenure is not absolute as the Swedish Rental Act strongly protects tenants and relocation and evictions cannot be made automatically but are determined by formal procedures and might be subject to trial in the Rental Tribunal (although tenants are not always aware of the legal formalities).

A municipal social contract is given after a positive decision on housing assistance by the social services. The right of disposal of the apartment has been secured beforehand through a contract between the municipality and the property owner. Apartments are owned by the municipality directly, municipal housing companies, or private property owners. Although municipalities and municipal housing companies provide the largest share of contracts, private property owners have increased their share, especially after the increase in immigration in 2015. Housing owned directly by the municipality mainly consists of rooms or apartments that are adjusted to house single or groups of households receiving treatment and/or care. Some municipalities also own tenant-ownership apartments (*bostadsrätter*) that are used for social purposes. These housing alternatives usually do not provide a pathway to normalisation of the rental contract as they have been acquired by the municipality for the sole purpose of being used for social purposes and are to stay as vehicles of the municipality. On the other hand, municipal social contracts provided by municipal housing companies and private property owners concern apartments in the regular housing stock and are offered either as 'passage' contracts (*genomgångskontrakt*) or 'transfer' contracts (*övergångskontrakt*). 'Passage' contracts are time limited and hence not a pathway to normalisation of the housing situation, but at least offer a chance to collect a good track record as a tenant, the proof of which is usually a requirement of property owners before a lease is signed. A 'transfer' contract, on the other hand, has a time limit within which the tenant's ability to meet the obligations under the contract are tested. If everything runs smoothly, the contract can be normalised, and the tenant thus enter the regular housing market. Standard times for the test period vary between municipalities, normally between six months and two years. It is quite common that property owners and sometimes social services do not deem the household to be ready to take over the contract within the time limit. Then a prolongation of the test period might be granted, or an alternative housing solution must be found. It is not unusual that both private and municipal property owners wish the mediation of the municipality as long as possible, as this provides the property owner with higher security. However, it has also been noted that different property owners have different approaches. For example, some private property owners do not wish to receive tenants unless there is hope that the contract can be normalised within a relatively

short period of time, as they do not wish to have the municipality as a long-term intermediary. Table 3 outlines the mix of housing alternatives in the six municipalities included in this study.

All of the studied municipalities use municipal social contracts, but in the two smallest municipalities the numbers are very limited and only given to households with severe social problems. In three of the four larger municipalities, the number of municipal social contracts have increased in recent years, in line with national development. Statistics on the number of apartments made available to each of the identified groups of people experiencing homelessness were not available for this study, except for certain newly-arrived immigrants whereby households arriving under the Settlement Act got social municipal contracts for two to five years in the four larger municipalities. In two of the municipalities, contracts can no longer be normalised; households are expected to arrange their own housing after the time limit expires. A change of policy to cap the use of social contracts has now been implemented or is under consideration in all four municipalities.

In the fourth larger municipality, there is no traditional municipal housing company, but the municipality has about 400 apartments that are only used for social needs. These are let to households selected by social authorities on two-year contracts without security of tenure. Additionally, some private property owners in the municipality let apartments to the municipality that are then sublet on the same terms.

It should be noted that, although apartments are let for social purposes, the municipalities in this study only pay the regular rent and no additional fees to the property owner. As Swedish rental law entails so called utility-value rents and not market rents, this usually means that rents are affordable and within reach both for the municipality when the rent is paid with benefits and for households on lower incomes from employment. However, it should be noted that this only applies to the older housing stock. For new apartments other rental clauses apply, which allows for cost based rents that are much higher than utility-value rents. When newly built apartments are used for social purposes, this burdens municipal budgets, and it is often difficult for households to pay the rent once it is able to take over the contract. The approach to using newly built apartments for municipal social contracts vary greatly between the municipalities in the study and is closely tied to availability of apartments in the older stock. In Gothenburg, newly arrived immigrants being assigned to the municipality through the Settlement Act are prioritised in new-build as their contracts are time limited to four or five years. It is argued that this is more transparent than if new apartments are given as 'transfer' contracts for households with social difficulties, as these are difficult to take over due to the high rents. In Jönköping, seven new buildings have been erected to house immigrants arriving under the Settlement Act (in addition to apartments in the older stock). This has

been made with the purpose of lessening the need for apartments in the stock so that competition between traditional groups and immigrants shall not be created. Other new-builds are not used for municipal social contracts as they are deemed too expensive. None of the other four municipalities use new-builds for social purposes nowadays.

Table 3. Supply of housing for social purposes in the studied municipalities

	Housing owned directly by the municipality*	Municipal housing company**	Cooperation with private property owners
Gothenburg	X	X	X
Lidingö	X		X
Norrköping	X	X	X
Jönköping	X	X	X
Filipstad		X	X
Säter		X	

*Housing owned directly by the municipality is used for social purposes only.

**Municipal housing companies are used to provide 'good housing for all' inhabitants in line with the unitary housing regime. The extent to which such housing is used for social purposes varies.

Support in the search for housing

As housing markets are tight, not all households find housing in the regular housing market. Households that turn to social authorities and present themselves as homeless but are not granted priority in housing queues or a municipal social contract, are, in an increasing number of municipalities, instead granted money for shelter (if needed) and support in the search for housing in the regular housing market.

The four larger municipalities in this study require that households actively search for housing within and outside the municipality. The level of assistance in the search varies greatly, from a mere instruction on how to join the local housing queue to a 'housing school', which includes not only different ways to enter the housing market, but also what is required to uphold a rental contract and practical advice on how to care properly for an apartment. Based on this assistance, some households manage to enter the regular housing market in the municipality where they presently reside. However, as the rental market usually is the only option for these households and housing queues tend to extend over several years, many households in an acute housing need also have to search for housing in other municipalities. In Sweden, four major lines of municipal action can be traced:

1. A sending and a receiving municipality cooperate in the transfer of a household. The receiving municipality does this to improve the demographics of the municipality, for example, through receiving younger households in a municipality with an aging population. When it comes to newly arrived immigrants, state financing during the establishment period can also be a decisive factor.
2. The municipality requires that households search for housing in a larger geographical area (for example the county) or the whole country without providing any concrete search assistance to the household.
3. The municipality requires that households search for housing in a larger geographical area (for example the county) or the whole country and provides concrete search assistance to the household. Such 'housing coaching' might include instructions on how to join housing queues and apply for apartments with different property owners.
4. The municipality requires that households search for housing in the whole country and provides concrete search assistance to the household. Additionally, the municipality maps other municipalities where there are vacancies and contacts property owners to, if possible, act as an intermediary between the household and the potential lessor. Contacts between the sending and the receiving municipality are rare.

When the household has moved to the new municipality, the responsibility to assist the household and pay benefits are transferred to the receiving municipality.

In this study, the two larger municipalities act according to point four, while the two medium-sized municipalities act according to point two. According to the mid-sized municipalities, there has been no discussions with neighbouring municipalities about their practice. Strategy number four has been adopted by various municipalities at least since the 1990s on a smaller scale, but in recent years it has been heatedly criticised by the receiving municipalities and named 'social dumping'. As many of the receiving municipalities are smaller and located in less populated areas, their economic situation is often strained. In this situation, additional households on benefits and in need of care and treatment are often seen as unwelcome. The sending municipalities refer to the practice as empowerment of the household, a chance to get education on how the housing market works and arrange one's own life instead of being taken care of by social services. Further, they point out that due to the local housing market situation, moving from the municipality is most probably the only way for the household to get a steady housing situation. One municipality also refers to reduced benefit payments as a positive effect of the strategy.

In 2020, the Minister of Public Administration commissioned the Swedish Agency for Public Management to investigate the extent of 'social dumping' and to suggest measures to stem such uses. The report confirms that 'active participation'⁴ by a municipality to assist households on benefits to find housing in other municipalities (even though the household has not expressed an explicit wish to move) is a problem for a number of municipalities and individuals (Statskontoret, 2020). Four, partly overlapping, groups that are subjected to such uses are pointed out: newly-arrived immigrants, problematic substance users and other households with social problems, households in need of protected housing, and structurally homeless households. The main measure against problematic 'active participation' proposed by the investigator is cooperation between municipalities led by the county administrative boards and that the Government amends the Settlement Act.

In Gothenburg and Jönköping, a relatively high percentage (>20 percent) of vacant apartments in municipal housing companies have been used for social purposes. There is an on-going discussion on the limit for municipal housing companies' responsibilities. Parallel to this, average housing queues have become longer. Municipalities link these two events, which also has an impact on the willingness to provide more social contracts. It can be assumed that when housing queues become longer, more households that previously could find housing on their own, especially given the relatively generous letting policies of municipal housing companies, cannot anymore and have to turn to social services for assistance and a vicious circle is created in the system. Requirements to search for housing in other municipalities should be seen also in the light of this interaction between social ambitions and political implications of impacts on the regular housing market.

Analysis and Discussion

Below, first aid to access to the regular housing market and then temporary housing assistance are discussed.

Direct access to the regular housing supply and access through social 'transfer' contracts

As seen above, the functioning of the regular housing market and the number of households in need decide municipal homelessness strategies to a large extent. Where there is vacant housing or housing queues are short, the preferred policy to give households in or on the verge of homelessness access to the regular

⁴ As 'social dumping' was conceived as a derogatory term, the Swedish Agency for Public Management has chosen to instead use the term 'active participation (in settlement in another municipality)' (Statskontoret, 2020).

housing supply is applied to a large extent. When an indefinite rental contract is not given from day one, time-limited social 'transfer' contracts are given. The household can then prove that it can manage a regular rental contract with the support of the social services and can then take over the contract with the property owner for an indefinite term.

However, an easily accessed housing market may cause an influx of less fortunate inhabitants from other municipalities, which put strains on municipal organisation and finance. 'Social dumping' is a growing problem. For some years, one of the smaller municipalities in the study has seen a larger inflow of inhabitants belonging to this group, but also a certain outflow, both of which make municipal planning difficult. Both vacant private housing and apartments of the municipal housing company have previously been let to such households. Today, some private property owners actively receive households on benefits from other municipalities. Smaller private property investors also have a business idea to invest in deteriorated housing in peripheral locations and let it to households on benefits that come from other municipalities. The municipality is currently experiencing a very strained economic situation and problems with social cohesion (see for example, SKL, 2019).

The other smaller municipality in the study has no experiences of 'social dumping' to date, possibly stemming from the fact that there are no vacancies in the private housing stock and the municipal housing company has a queue. Although the queue is relatively short, it might still hinder an inflow as apartments cannot be accessed directly and benefits from other municipalities are not accepted as income when signing a lease contract with the municipal housing company. However, this situation might change rather quickly in a more strained economy that causes people to leave smaller municipalities for other job markets. An easily accessed housing market might also put strains on other municipal areas of responsibility such as social support, treatment, benefits, and care of the elderly. Such experiences have also been seen in some of the larger towns in the past.

In larger municipalities where housing queues stretch over several years, direct access to the regular housing supply is given under certain conditions in the form of priority in housing queues. Priority in housing queues can also result in time-limited social contracts. Until recently, a large proportion of households turning to social services to get assistance to enter the housing market have been channelled through such priority lists. In some municipalities in the study, priority has been given to more than 20 percent of vacant apartments in municipal housing companies. Special drives to reduce homelessness have been made, for example, in Gothenburg where 700 homeless families with children were given priority to regular housing contracts. In other municipalities, no such measures have been

made. As the number of households in need have increased, priorities between households have had to be made as municipalities have not had access to enough apartments to satisfy demand. As described above, a distinction is made between social and structural homelessness. It should be pointed out that not all households deemed to be homeless for social reasons are entitled to housing. Structurally homeless households are today only entitled to housing in one of the larger municipalities, and then only under certain conditions. However, the increasing use of the terms social and structural homelessness indicates that socially homeless households *might* be entitled to housing, while structurally homeless households are not.

In the six municipalities in the study, it is clear that housing owned by the municipality plays the central role in provision of housing for social purposes, although social contracts in privately owned housing is increasing in all but the smallest municipalities. However, with increasingly generous letting policies of municipal housing companies, an increasing number of social contracts, and larger numbers of social contracts being transferred into regular rental contracts after a time limit, the share of tenants on lower incomes and possibly also social problems is bound to increase, in some municipalities from already high levels. What this means related to the financial standing of municipal housing companies, and hence their ability to provide good quality housing, is unknown. Further, the possibility to avoid concentrations of households of lesser means vary greatly between companies depending on the structure and location of their housing stocks, as well as vacancy patterns. The impact on housing queues of larger shares of vacant apartments being used for social purposes is also a point of discussion, as vicious circles where households that previously have gained access to the housing market on their own now have to ask for assistance. In all, this has raised a debate on the limits of social responsibility of municipal housing companies. The housing stock reserved for social purposes that is owned directly by the municipality (not by municipal housing companies) is not the subject of such discussions to the same extent, as it was never meant to be part of the regular housing market. However, there is a limited discussion on housing quality.

In the Swedish unitary housing regime, the ideal is equal access by all households to the regular housing market and there is no *de jure* social housing. The shift toward more generous letting policies in many municipal housing companies, including some of the herein studied municipalities, priority given in rental housing queues and the relatively generous rules when transforming municipal social contracts into regular lease contracts are in line with this ideal as they work towards an integration of households in the regular housing market. However, an increasing restrictiveness in giving priority in housing queues has been noted in all of the four larger municipalities in the study. An increasing pressure on the regular housing market and longer queues for rental housing have a direct impact on apartments available as there are no

designated apartments for social purposes (except in one municipality). Municipal housing companies also monitor the economic and social effects of more generous letting policies, although none of them have noticed significant effects as of yet. Although private property owners have increased their share in offering housing to households of lesser means, as well as social contracts in recent years, municipal housing companies still offer the bulk of apartments accessible to the group as well as social 'transfer' contracts. As a result, tenants in the municipal housing stock have a less advantageous socioeconomic composition than tenants at large and compared to other tenures (Borg, 2018) and many would have limited chances of finding decent housing outside the municipal housing stock. Hence, parts of Swedish municipal housing might be labelled *de facto* social housing, as it is not regulated, but performs the duties of such a sector. However, it is important to note that Swedish municipal housing companies are not pure social housing providers, as they provide both for the vulnerable and other households. Moreover, the choice of what particular apartments that are used in priority policies vary between municipalities and between areas within municipalities.

Social 'passage' contracts and support in the search for housing

Municipal social 'transfer' contracts that in the end are not transformed into regular lease contracts and social 'passage' contracts that are time limited are often referred to as a residual form of social housing. However, as these solutions are time limited and hence do not assist the household to solve its housing problems permanently and are managed directly by social services, they are more closely linked to pure social policy rather than housing policy, and therefore might be classified as a social vehicle (which exist in many countries parallel to social housing systems). One municipality in the study has chosen to only have social 'passage' contracts that are limited to two years. As there are relatively few apartments, time limits are strict and apartments are usually assigned by social services, this housing stock is clearly a social vehicle, rather than social housing.

Two of the municipalities in the study have created new housing units to cater for immigrant households allocated through the Settlement Act. In one of the municipalities this arrangement is a temporary solution in a redevelopment area, but in the other municipality the housing is of higher quality in line with permanent housing standards. It remains to be seen if this housing will be incorporated into the municipal housing company and the mix of tenants will be larger in the future or if this housing will remain a social policy vehicle for selected groups.

As the number of households deemed not to be entitled to housing is growing, alternative measures have been taken in the form of assistance to housing. When assistance to housing is granted, the household is given money in the short-term to get a roof over the head(s) and is requested to search for housing in or outside

the municipality where it presently resides. In some municipalities they are also given advice and education on how to enter the housing market. All of the four larger municipalities apply this strategy to some extent.

'Active participation' (Statskontoret, 2020) by municipalities to arrange housing for vulnerable households in other municipalities is also in line with the unitary housing regime, as households then enter the regular housing market. However, questions of whether the housing situation or the possibility to find employment is more important have been raised (Statskontoret, 2020). Further, the quality of the housing stock offered does not always live up to regular Swedish standards.

Conclusion

The Swedish unitary housing regime entails that everybody should be included in the regular housing market and that there should be no housing reserved for vulnerable households. However, this regime presupposes certain measures such as housing allowances, municipal social contracts, and priority in housing queues. Moreover, municipal housing companies often play a larger role compared to other actors on the rental market when it comes to giving priorities in housing queues and having relatively generous letting policies, which has led to having larger proportions of socially and economically vulnerable households. It might be claimed that although there is no regulated social housing sector in Sweden, some municipal housing companies are in part *de facto* social housing, as they perform the role of such a sector.

In a housing market more or less in balance, the ideal can be implemented without creating vicious circles where other households are excluded because some get priority (which might lead to that more households need assistance to enter the housing market). When the housing market is not in balance and both demand and need exceed supply, there will naturally be competition for existing housing. Both housing cost and housing access eligibility then come into play and more households need assistance to enter the housing market. The pressure on municipal housing companies to meet demand both from their housing queues and from social services increases and priorities given to one group will influence the other. There is an expectation that municipal housing companies should master both these tasks in all market situations and still act on 'market-like terms', as well as contribute to housing construction. Doing this split has shown increasingly difficult in larger municipalities. Private property owners are increasing their share of social contracts with municipal guarantees, but not enough to eliminate the lack of supply. Construction of new housing has proven less effective in solving the problem, as it

is often too expensive to serve as a long-term solution for households on lower incomes. The influence of housing chains on the supply of lower-rent apartments has also proven to be limited.

Three of the larger municipalities in this study have made extensive efforts to prevent and work against homelessness. Generous queue rules to municipal housing companies have been combined with priority lists to both regular rental contracts and social contracts. However, these efforts have not been enough to solve problems of larger amounts of households. The limited supply of potential housing solutions might lead to municipalities resorting to other strategies, such as reducing the right to housing and the introduction of assistance to find housing in other municipalities. Alternative solutions such as an increased municipal housing ownership outside the traditional municipal housing companies are limited.

Future research could further explore the different facets of this development and the various pathways chosen by different municipalities. Today, there are indications of a certain policy convergence among municipalities, but it remains to be seen if this development prevails. Comparative research with other European cities and their pathways to permanent housing within or outside the social housing sector could also shed more light on the role of the housing regime. Last but not least, the relationship between social policy and housing policy could be further explored, preferably in a multi-country perspective.

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