

Introduction

The Swedish Association of City Mission has published an annual homelessness report. In 2020 the report was a mapping of the situation in Sweden, a comparison of homelessness in other European countries and a suggestion of a national strategy against homelessness. The report is based on research by Marcus Knutagard, associate professor Lund University.

A PICTURE OF HOMELESSNESS in Sweden

Rates of homelessness in Sweden are not decreasing. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare's most recent mapping of homelessness published in 2017 reported that the number of people who are homeless was over 33,000¹. This is no improvement on the situation recorded in 2011's mapping. Despite fewer municipalities having responded to the 2017 survey, this figure indicates much greater levels of homelessness². Furthermore, some groups such as undocumented immigrants were not included in the mapping.

The National Board of Health and Welfare's mapping and those regularly conducted by municipalities should therefore be seen as accounts that provide snapshots of the situation in Sweden – but not the bigger picture. The results of the mapping and subsequent surveys conducted in several municipalities have clearly indicated that the provision of housing is one of the more serious social problems in Sweden.

This is supported by calculations by the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket) that are based on the criterion of how many households lack suitable housing. Boverket's model shows that 462,000 households are overcrowded, and of these, 56,000 report having a strained household economy³.

Financial reasons behind many cases of homelessness

Modern homelessness has many faces. It affects people from various backgrounds, and we can see an increase in homelessness amongst people who – prior to becoming homeless – did not have any problems with addiction, their mental health, or other social problems. We note how children and women, older people and those who are financially vulnerable are affected. Fifteen years ago, addiction or mental health problems were behind 80 per cent of homelessness cases. Today, this figure is below 60 per cent⁴. The social safety net is unable to catch everyone. The idea that homelessness is something that affects socially vulnerable people is not true. Today, many people are homeless as a result of financial circumstances.

¹ <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2017-11-15.pdf>

² <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2017-11-15.pdf>

³ Boverket (2020). Housing shortage measurements. <https://www.boverket.se/sv/om-boverket/publicerat-av-boverket/publikationer/2020/matt-pa-bostadsbristen/> Retrieved 5 November 2020

⁴ <https://forte.se/artikel/allt-fler-hemlosa-bostads%C2%ADbristens-sverige/>

At the same time, people who have become homeless risk developing mental health problems as well as social problems such as addiction.

Structural homelessness continues to rise

In Sweden, structural homelessness exists and continues to grow. People who would otherwise have no problems maintaining somewhere to live are simply unable to find accommodation. Sweden has a widespread shortage of housing caused by a long-term lack of building new properties to meet population growth. Sweden has no cohesive national policy to address both the housing shortage and homelessness.

CURRENT HOMELESSNESS POLICY IN SWEDEN

The issue of homelessness has long been viewed as a socio-political matter. However, the issue has moved on from being social policy to instead being more a matter of housing policy and provision. We see the same trend in political debate, and it is in line with issues the National Association for City Missions in Sweden (Stadsmissionen) has long addressed.

No national homelessness policy

Currently, there is no Swedish national homeless policy. The previous strategy to counteract homelessness ceased to apply in 2009 and has not been replaced with a new national policy or strategy. Instead, it is incorporated into Sweden's general housing policy. On a national level, there is a focus on the general efforts being made to provide housing – which for a long time has been a case of improving access to housing by building more homes.

Problems with the housing market

Recent developments on the Swedish housing market have not contributed positively. Even though previously increasing housing costs levelled out around 2017 and subsequent rises being less dramatic, the cost of small homes and apartments continues to rise. There had been a general increase in housing construction, however this has now turned. Furthermore, many new requirements have been placed on the housing market in recent years; loan ceilings and amortisation requirements have further made access to housing difficult for various groups.

In recent years, housing construction in Sweden has increased from almost 35,000 completed properties in 2015 to just under 55,000 in 2018 then settling around 55,000 in 2019⁵. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that despite this increase construction, many of Sweden's municipalities have a housing shortage. In the annual housing market survey, 212 municipalities reported a housing shortage whereas 66 reported a balance on the housing market. The number of municipalities with housing shortages has reduced over the past two

⁵ <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/boende-byggande-och-bebyggelse/bostadsbyggande-och-ombyggnad/nybyggnad-av-bostader/pong/tabell-och-diagram/antal-fardigstallda-lagenheter-i-flerbostadshus-resp.-smahus/>

years, however they still make up 74 per cent of the 286 municipalities that responded to the survey⁶.

Boverket's prognoses show that construction has decreased in the wake of the pandemic and suggest that it will continue to decrease in both 2020 and 2021. There is great uncertainty surrounding development over the coming years⁷. Despite the increase in construction in the year before the pandemic, there are still groups who struggle to gain a footing on the housing market. One reason is that people who are homeless seldom have the means to afford newly built housing. The effect of housing chains in which newly produced housing frees up cheaper apartments has also been questioned⁸.

In order to stimulate construction to create a better-functioning housing market, several housing policies have been presented in recent years. Investment support aimed at the production of rental housing is just one major incentive. However, it has not made a difference to homelessness since its introduction.

Non-existent desirable housing chains

Regardless of whether private companies or municipalities provide the newly produced housing, rents are high – especially in the major towns and cities. At the same time, there is poor access to older rental properties with lower rents. This is both the result of long housing waiting lists and landlords – private and municipal – placing greater requirements on potential tenants to be able to sign rental contracts. Consequently, the desired housing chains necessary for a well-functioning housing market are simply not created. Many people seeking to rent are therefore unable to access affordable housing⁹. When this is then combined with the rapid growth in Sweden's population over the past decade, a problematic situation arises. Essentially, this excludes many people from the Swedish housing market and results in homelessness.

Difficulty entering the housing market

The Swedish housing market has been described as one of the most deregulated in the Western world. Deregulation and privatisation have made it difficult for many groups to be able to enter the regular housing market. There is great competition for rental properties, meaning there are few incentives for property companies to rent to households with limited financial means or social problems.

⁶

<https://www.boverket.se/sv/samhallsplanering/bostadsmarknad/bostadsmarknaden/bostadsmarknadsenkaten/>

⁷ <https://www.boverket.se/sv/samhallsplanering/bostadsmarknad/bostadsmarknaden/indikatorer/>

⁸ Rasmussen et al. 2018

⁹ See Stockholm City Mission's Hemlös 2017 report for a detailed analysis of housing chains.

The deregulated nature of the Swedish housing market has not benefitted people who are homeless – homelessness creates major costs for society just as alternative housing solutions generate large profits for certain operators.

Legislation enabling public housing companies to be run following business principles and for profit has further blocked access to the housing market. The incentives and possibilities for both public and private property owners to participate in creating better-functioning housing provision need to be strengthened.

The January Agreement makes no mention of homelessness

The current government's political policy is based on the January Agreement between four political parties. Although the agreement includes housing policy proposals such as reforms to fixing rents, simplifying planning permission and expanding investment support to cover construction of properties throughout Sweden, there is no element intended to combat homelessness¹⁰. Hence, it is unlikely that current government measures will have any noticeable effect on homelessness. Firstly, it takes a long time until new builds are ready for tenants. Secondly, financial, and social reasons make it difficult for people who are homeless to register their interest in renting newly built housing. Finally, neither a strategy nor clear forms of collaboration between state and municipalities exist regarding homelessness.

Inquiry into socially sustainable housing provision

In 2020, the government launched a new initiative for issues related to housing provision. In May 2020, a government inquiry into socially sustainable housing provision led by member of parliament Karolina Skog was launched. The resulting proposals will be presented in November 2021¹¹. The inquiry aims to create the basis for socially sustainable housing provision to combat segregation and help households struggling to find a place to live due to market conditions, for example those who are currently homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The inquiry will review how the issue is divided between state and municipality, and the tools for housing policy available to municipalities to help households who are far removed from the housing market.

The National Association for City Missions in Sweden welcomes the fact that the government has launched this inquiry. The inquiry can contribute to increasing national interest in issues related to homelessness and highlight the need for more overarching initiatives and cohesive policy to put an end to homelessness. However, the inquiry will not include the matter of any new national strategy. Stadsmissionen considers this a disappointment. For

¹⁰ <https://www.centerpartiet.se/download/18.7cb2d720169e39ebc8f28b2/1554992070288/Januariavtalet.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/kommittedirektiv/2020/05/dir.-202053/>

many years, Stadsmissionen has been clear and continually pushed the matter of the need to create a national strategy to be able to properly address and end homelessness.

In November, the government tasked the National Board of Health and Welfare to propose measures to support municipalities with implementing the Bostad Först/*Housing First* project, increasing outreach work for people who are homeless or risk becoming homeless and suggesting how municipalities can work to prevent evictions locally. Stadsmissionen welcomes these efforts, however, we note that this is another task that does not address the necessary overarching initiative.

In this report, Stadsmissionen points to the need for a national homelessness strategy and the main points that need to be included – proposals that should ideally be considered in the inquiry. These proposals could form the basis of additional directives for the current inquiry and increase pressure to create the comprehensive definition – for which there is a great need.

TABLE 1: HOMELESSNESS AS PER THE NATIONAL BOARD OF HEALTH AND WELFARE 2017 MAPPING¹²

HOUSING FORMS TOTAL	
Acute homelessness (Situation 1)	5,935
Institution or assisted living (Situation 2)	4,899
Long-term living arrangements organised by the Social Services (Situation 3)	15,838
Private short-term living arrangement (Situation 4)	5,726
Other/unknown	871
TOTAL:	33,269

HOMELESSNESS AT A MUNICIPAL LEVEL

Every six years, the National Board of Health and Welfare maps homelessness in Sweden. The latest report was published in 2017 and the next is planned for 2023. Consequently, there is a risk of political decisions and working methods being based on outdated information.

Around 20 municipalities, including all major cities, conduct their own surveys in addition to the mapping conducted by the National Board of Health and Welfare. These surveys are conducted once per year or every second year. Stadsmissionen's *Homeless 2019* report included an analysis of how the municipalities map homelessness. The analysis showed several differences in the picture of homelessness¹³.

¹² <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/globalassets/sharepoint-dokument/artikelkatalog/ovrigt/2017-11-15.pdf>

¹³ Stockholm City Mission, Homeless 2019, part 3.

Municipalities and the National Board of Health and Welfare use different approaches for measuring homelessness

The analysis showed that municipalities report both higher and lower levels of homelessness than those presented in the National Board of Health and Welfare's mapping. For example, Borlänge reported a higher number of homeless people, whereas Malmö reported a significantly lower number. There are several reasons for this. In part, it might be the case that a municipality has better knowledge of where to access information about people who are homeless, creating clearer results with a higher response rate. Additionally, certain municipalities may have chosen to use alternative definitions for homelessness than those used by the National Board of Health and Welfare since 2011.

The fact that there is no common definition of how to measure and survey homelessness means that the knowledge base is impaired, and decisions are taken based on incorrect grounds. Neither an authority such as the National Board of Health and Welfare, nor the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) have issued clear recommendations to municipalities to map homelessness, or how to approach such a task. Hence, a common definition and approach to mapping homelessness is just one example of how the issue can be addressed within the framework of a national and cohesive homelessness policy. One of the requirements included in Stadmissionen's *Homeless 2019* report was for the National Board of Health and Welfare and all Swedish municipalities to establish a collective definition for addressing homelessness.

An inconsistent picture of homelessness

If we look at information from the municipalities that conduct their own regular surveys of homelessness, we see many differences. For example, Stockholm city last conducted a survey in 2018 and found that the number of homeless people had risen to 2,439. This is a break in trend compared to previous development in Stockholm over the past decade¹⁴. However, in Gothenburg's most recent survey conducted and presented in 2020 we see there is a larger decline of 26 per cent, with 3,733 people being homeless in the city¹⁵. Malmö's latest survey conducted in 2019 shows there has been a decrease in the number of homeless people from 3,300 in 2018 to 2,042 in 2019. It is worth noting that compared to Gothenburg, Malmö's measuring criteria are not as broad as those used by the National Board of Health and Welfare, hence people who would be included in Situation 3 are not considered to be homeless¹⁶.

¹⁴Homeless people in Stockholm city, <https://insynsverige.se/documentHandler.ashx?did=1962114>

¹⁵<https://stadsutveckling.goteborg.se/bostader/nyheter/hemlosheten-fortsatter-att-minska-i-goteborg/>

¹⁶<https://malmo.se/Sa-arbetar-vi-med.../Bostadsbrist-och-hemloshet/Fakta-om-hemloshet-i-Malmo.html>

Smaller municipalities have also conducted their own surveys and produced up to date figures. One of these municipalities is Nyköping. Their 2019 survey states that there are 365 people who are homeless – a slight increase from 2018. Nevertheless, this number is double that from 2014¹⁷. Västerås surveys levels of homelessness annually, and in 2019 there were 597 homeless people – a small increase on the previous year¹⁸.

This shows that homelessness rates vary across Sweden, thus no reliable overall picture of the situation is available.

Municipal measures for combatting homelessness

The most recent Boverket housing market survey shows that most municipalities now have active guidelines for providing housing. In 2019, 257 municipalities (88%) stated that they had guidelines in place. This is four fewer than in 2018, but nevertheless is an increase of 54 municipalities since 2017¹⁹.

The survey also outlines how 248 municipalities rent out housing to people who are not approved by the regular housing market, subject to special conditions²⁰. In their publication *Open comparisons of homelessness 2020* (in Swedish), the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) reported that the number of municipalities conducting outreach work with people who are at risk of eviction had increased from 55 per cent in 2018 to 62 per cent. Open comparisons also show that currently, one-fifth of municipalities offer housing initiatives in line with the principles of Housing First²¹. At the same time, researchers have determined that in reality, only 20 or so municipalities apply the principles presented in the Housing First guidelines²².

Public housing companies make up one municipal resource that could be used more in the work against homelessness. The majority of Sweden's municipalities have such companies. The law permits a distribution of assets from public housing companies to incentives such as those promoting integration or housing needs for people at a disadvantage on the housing market. However, this possibility is often overlooked. Of the 263 public housing companies, 61 per cent did not distribute any assets during 2017²³.

¹⁷<https://nykoping.se/omsorg--stod/hemloshet> Kartläggning av hemlöshet 2019

¹⁸

<https://www.vasteras.se/download/18.1bbf82e91715d86818127161/1587112587545/11.%20Heml%C3%B6shetskartl%C3%A4ggning%202019.pdf>

¹⁹<https://boverket.se/sv/samhallsplanering/bostadsmarknad/bostadsforsorjning/kommunernas-verktyg/riktlinjer>

²⁰<https://boverket.se/sv/samhallsplanering/bostadsmarknad/bostadsmarknaden/bostadsmarknadsenkaten/>

²¹<https://skl.se/tjanster/merfranskl/oppnajokforelser/hemloshet.1404.html>

²²<https://www.bostadforst.se/svenska-myndigheter-om-bostad-forst/>

²³<https://www.boverket.se/sv/om-boverket/publicerat-av-boverket/publikationer/2019/vardeoverforingar-fran-allmannyttiga-kommunala-bostadsaktiebolag-for-rakenskapsaret-2017/>

As there is no national homelessness policy, the municipalities face the full responsibility of working to reduce homelessness and support those who are already homeless, or risk becoming so. Municipalities work in different ways and use an array of different tools. It is a case of what they prioritise when planning housing provision.

This could involve partnerships and collaborations with both public housing companies and private landlords to generate access to properties that can be used for existing and future social housing; proactive measures against eviction; the principles of Housing First; other emergency housing solutions; and surveying rates of homelessness in each municipality. Despite this, homelessness continues to grip Sweden.

Current measures insufficient

In summary, we can determine that government homelessness policy is entirely dependent on general housing policy measures. However, despite municipalities' good intentions and often major incentives, their circumstances mean they cannot guarantee they are able to meet all the needs that exist. With this in mind, we see a need for a new and broader approach to better address the problem of homelessness.

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR CITY MISSIONS IN SWEDEN'S PROPOSALS FOR A NEW STRATEGY

Stadsmissionen wants to make sure that a national strategy to fight homelessness is put in place as soon as possible. This is decisive if we are to break the negative cycle of increasing levels of homelessness in Sweden. The strategy needs to be led by housing, be enduring and evidence-based, and build on the state taking responsibility.

We believe that to be successful, a new national strategy to combat homelessness needs to build on the following six pillars.

1. HOUSING FIRST – A NECESSARY STARTING POINT

Housing First is the clear starting point for a strategy that can seriously combat homelessness and enable people who are homeless or who risk becoming so to access secure, long-term housing. The attempts that have been made in Sweden have demonstrated that the Housing First method works – and both Swedish and international research supports this. Housing must come first – any other problems an individual may be facing can be addressed afterwards.

Therefore, Housing First needs to be seen as a national model and be implemented in every municipality.

Housing First should also be clearly linked to municipalities using mobile and flexible support teams to help break down the negative social patterns that people who have left homelessness may experience – addiction for example.

2. THE STATE NEEDS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY TO END HOMELESSNESS

The divided Swedish policy is not working. The state needs to take more responsibility to put an end to homelessness and enable people who are homeless to find somewhere to live. To be successful, the following is necessary:

- A serious national housing strategy to facilitate new builds throughout Sweden – building homes builds welfare.
- A Swedish model for social housing.

Here, we can draw inspiration from Finland and start our own Y Foundation. Examples of financiers include pension funds, Postkodlotteriet, Svenska Spel etc. Most importantly, a Swedish foundation must develop a strategy that is just as ambitious as its Finnish counterpart – and eradicate homelessness by 2030.

The foundation must aim to build, buy, and rent out affordable housing. Ideally, mixed housing or homes with different letting forms and mixed target groups – rather than simply properties earmarked for people on low incomes.

- A review of the government housing allowance that aims to increase the amount and review the possibility for more people to be eligible for the allowance.
- New national regulation of what can be considered a reasonable income requirement for renters that also takes financial support into account and accepts it as fixed income.
- A new national regulation regarding the possibility to require deposits that equate to monthly rents when a rental contract is signed. This would make it easier for more people to sign rental contracts for properties on the regular housing market.
- Rules for subletting and possible rental costs, as well as the possibility to review for-profit housing services, and a clarification to regulations in order to minimise unreasonably high rents and fees.
- National guidelines for how to survey and map the number of people who are homeless, that are then used for all surveys. Surveys need to take place with greater frequency in order to be able to evaluate and follow up on the work as per the national strategy.

3. CLEAR REQUIREMENTS FOR MUNICIPALITIES ESSENTIAL

A great deal of responsibility lies with the municipalities. It is a decisive factor in a new strategy that the state must take more responsibility and create a comprehensive policy, and make sure that this policy is implemented and has the desired effect. Therefore, it is unavoidable that a strategy will also need to place requirements on municipalities such as:

- Employing a user directive aimed at the public housing companies as a tool to build new housing with reasonable rents.
- Ensuring that it is clear in the user directive that public housing companies must contribute to social sustainability, by enabling an integration of social housing in both existing and forthcoming housing stocks.
- Avoiding selling public housing, and refrain from selling public housing to companies that renovate individual apartments for the sole purpose of increasing rents²⁴.
- Taking proactive measures to prevent evictions.
- Requiring municipalities to place clear requirements for affordable and accessible housing in their land policies.
- Employing the proposed Swedish Y Foundation to prevent the creation of segregated social housing.

²⁴ <https://www.hemhyra.se/nyheter/kartlaggning-tusentals-konceptreoveringar-chockhojer-hyrorna/>

- Increasing the possibility for municipalities to provide their own housing allowance, through the application of Act on Certain Municipal Powers (2009:47)²⁵
- Working systematically with social prioritisation.
- Increasing security with social housing contracts used by municipal social services in relation to rent laws to make things easier for the individual. Current formulation means that a person can be removed from their housing immediately and find themselves acutely homeless – this is not sustainable in the long term. A system with guaranteed rents can create this security.
- Implementing a collaboration with the government to improve and develop support services for people with addiction problems and the work with mental health problems – two significant underlying causes that can result in an individual becoming homeless. They must be addressed in order to be able to decrease homelessness and subsequently the human, social and financial costs.

4. THE SOCIAL SERVICES ACT NEEDS UPDATING

The Social Services Act needs to be reviewed and be a better tool in the work against homelessness. The importance that social services need to follow evidence-based methods must be established. The law must make it clear that the room for interpretation is narrow. Hence municipalities cannot “work their way out” of their responsibility to provide housing by preventing people who have been categorised as structurally homeless from accessing help as they are not viewed as having special difficulties.

The elements of the Social Services Act that affect children also need to be fine-tuned to minimise the risk of children ending up homeless. Now that the Convention on the Rights of the Child has become law, it is reasonable to interpret what is outlined in Article 3 – *In all actions concerning children (...) the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration* – as including their access to secure housing being included in the right to aid for reasonable living conditions.

In this matter, it is important to call attention to the fact that the government needs to respect and live up to the funding principle towards municipalities if municipal tasks increase.

5. COLLABORATION IS ONE KEY TO SUCCESS

The strategy needs to include clear definitions for collaboration. An integrated homelessness strategy must include state, region and municipality creating a formal collaboration to implement the strategy – its form should be explored.

²⁵ https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-200947-om-vissa-kommunala-befogenheter_sfs-2009-47

Furthermore, the strategy must ensure that the public sector also begins a formal collaboration with the ideological sector and volunteer organisations. User influence and participation also needs to be established. Co-production is one suitable method.

6. WE NEED TO CREATE SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES (AGENDA 2030)

A national strategy to counteract homelessness must be anchored in Agenda 2030. It needs to focus on creating a society that is economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable. It is vital that focus is on the long-term creation of a resilient and sustainable society. This is to prevent us from rapidly building new housing that is not environmentally sustainable and that reinforces polarisation and social inequality. All parties need to work together and think anew. The aim must be to create a functioning housing market for everyone, and make sure that we can create high quality housing across the board.

TIME TO PUT WORDS INTO ACTION

It is high time for action. We cannot wait any longer. A lot can happen over a relatively short time – should the political will exist. Since the government launched their inquiry into socially sustainable housing provision *Fi 2020:06* in May, the time is right to create the necessary overall approach to the matter. Give the inquiry an additional directive and ask them to come back with a clear response for how Sweden will solve homelessness – ideally inspired by Finland and Scotland, and with clear grounding in the points above.

Give the responsible authorities clear guidelines now for what can be improved and implemented faster. Commission further inquiries immediately that might be necessary to change laws that influence the possibility to fight homelessness – for example, the Swedish Municipal Housing Responsibility act and the Public Municipal Housing Companies Act. Do not wait to launch the legislative work necessary for the foundation for managing social housing in Sweden.