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# Moving Targets: On reducing public responsibilities through re-categorising homeless people and refugees

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- **Abstract\_** *Categorising people and housing situations is unavoidable in research and national and local statistics on homelessness, as well as in regulating and planning for interventions and supply and allocation of suitable accommodation. Despite different motives and original functions, however, these categories and the use of them are influenced by the political discourse, especially when they travel from one policy area or level to another. This article deals with categorical change through revisions of target groups of policies to settle newly arrived refugees and accommodate homeless people, respectively, in municipalities in the south of Sweden. One conclusion is that certain subcategories of homeless people and newly arrived refugees seem to overlap, forming a specific category of non-entitled homeless refugee families, who are excluded from the target groups of settlement policies as well as homeless policies. Another conclusion is that municipalities can actively defy the general imperative of integration and housing provision through responsabilising the target group.*
- **Keywords\_** *structurally homeless; newly arrived refugees; re-categorisation; local homeless policies\_*

## Introduction

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Of the more than 20 million refugees outside their country of origin and under UNHCR's mandate in 2018, most were staying in neighbouring countries, while 2.8 million were hosted by Europe (UNHCR, 2019, p.13). Within the EU, Sweden has a relatively high rate of refugees (25 per 1 000 inhabitants) (ibid. p.21). By the end of 2019, 19,6 per cent of Sweden's 10.33 million inhabitants were born abroad. During 2019, 26 424 people were granted asylum or residence permits as family members. However, less than a quarter of all the residence permits approved by the Swedish Migration Agency that year were granted to refugees and their families; the rest concerned labour migrants, other family members, students, guest researchers, etc. (The Swedish Migration Agency Statistics 2020). In addition, an unknown number of EU/EES-citizens were staying in Sweden. Still, much of the public debate on immigration in the country focuses on the 'newly arrived', i.e. refugees and their families from third countries who recently got residence permits, are registered in a municipality and subject to regular establishment measures.

This article examines and reflects on classifications of newly arrived refugees without homes and other homeless people in the Swedish context, with a special focus on policies and practice in the municipalities of the Skåne county. The aim is to explore and grasp how the general categories 'homeless' and 'newly arrived' are (re-)defined and differentiated over time in local settings and policies. How do the municipalities delimit their target groups for homeless/refugee accommodation? How do they motivate and account for these boundaries and their revisions? And how are categorical distinctions within the larger groups of refugees and homeless people related to each other?

Hacking's (1986/2006) theories on categorical changes through interaction have inspired the title 'Moving targets', which is intended to cover different movements and their causes. *First*, it refers to the fact that the goals and *target groups* of refugee settlement policies as well as homeless policies *are changing*, partly due to new legislation and requirements for state subsidies, partly due to new, locally determined principles for housing assistance to homeless people or newly arrived refugees. This kind of move is facilitated by the Swedish principle of municipal self-government, combined with the inherent ambiguity of valid legislation and vague policy concepts that remain open for interpretation.

*Secondly*, *individuals* categorised as one kind or another of homeless people *are being re-categorised* because of, e.g., changed age (turning 18) or family status (single, couple or family with minor children), time spent in the country with residence permit – or due to policy-induced or financially motivated re-interpretations of existing rights, rules and requirements. Accordingly, re-categorisations of

individuals may be caused by altered circumstances and the fact that time passes, but they may also be initiated by national or local authorities, political actors or by professionals' revision of their assessment of individuals.

*Thirdly, individuals* in the target group may *move physically* to some other accommodation within or outside the municipality in which they were first registered – voluntarily or because they are dislocated and forced to move by the local authorities or (other) landlords. Physical moves, in turn, often entail or are preceded by re-categorisations.

Put differently, targets and target groups are movable and sometimes fluid, related to power, policies, rights and numbers; categories are defined in and out of them, and categories change and are re-defined – as do the categorised people. These three types of 'moves' will be illustrated below by the delimitation of two kinds of target groups for municipal support to accommodation – newly arrived refugees and homeless people in general – with examples gathered from the research project *Scanian Homes*<sup>1</sup>. This study's aim is to investigate, assess and compare 'regular' homeless policies and policies to settle newly arrived refugees in the 33 municipalities of the Skåne county, located in the very south of Sweden with 1.38 million inhabitants, whereof 22.6 per cent are born abroad. According to the latest national count of homeless people, 5 452 people (18 years or older) were homeless in Skåne in April 2017 (NBHW, 2017). Almost 3 000 of them stayed in Malmö, which is the third largest city in Sweden.<sup>2</sup>

The research methods are diverse and include a questionnaire to the municipalities, interviews and focus group discussions with social workers/housing coordinators, and analyses of policy documents and political board proceedings published on the municipalities' websites 2016–2019, as well as an overview of national investigations and legislation. Ethnographic case studies are conducted in four municipalities, including observations and interviews with newly arrived refugees and homeless people. In a special case study in Malmö, we explore the implications and implementation of new guidelines for homeless accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This research project is financed by the research council FORMAS and carried out by researchers at the School of Social Work at Lund University, 2018–2021. Project leader is Marcus Knutagård.

<sup>2</sup> This figure deviates from the city's own. The NBHW counts (adult) individuals, known by NGOs, institutions and social services, excluding EU-migrants, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants but including tenants on the secondary housing market. The city excludes also the latter group in its mappings and surveys only clients with the social services.

<sup>3</sup> The municipal case studies are conducted by Arne Kristiansen and Weddig Runquist, and the follow-up study of the new guidelines in Malmö by Weddig Runquist and myself.

The point of departure for this research is that the following groups with an insecure and problematic housing situation are differently targeted by national and possibly local policies:

- a) newly arrived refugees, assigned by the Migration Agency to specific municipalities for settlement;
- b) newly arrived refugees, settled in the municipality on their own initiative ('self-settled'), and
- c) 'other homeless people'.

The first two groups are primarily distinguished by the legislation that obliges municipalities to accommodate assigned but not self-settled newly arrived refugees; the third group is not targeted by any national policy but often by traditional, local homeless policies.

In what follows I will first discuss what categories do and how they can be analysed. Next, I briefly present national and local policies regarding refugee settlement and homelessness. Then follow two recent examples of how municipalities in Skåne move their targets: first a distinction between so-called 'structurally' and 'socially homeless', then the revision of a plan for integrating and accommodating newly arrived refugees.

## **The Study of Categories and their Functions**

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Categorising people is not only a means to describe and analyse a certain population but also a way to obtain control and govern through drawing borders between groups, whose internal variations are simultaneously disguised or neglected. Because they infer simplification and may imply rights, categorisations are continuously contested, defended and revised. Policy-related categories are, in addition, often subjected to critical analysis for the costs they may imply for the public. Change of labels is one common response to such criticism, differentiation is another.

Research into immigration policies has, among other things, focused on the implications of migrant categories as defined by law and used by politicians and the media (see, e.g., Jørgensen, 2012; Schrover and Moloney, 2013; Schrover and Schinkel, 2013), and dealt with the definition of 'refugee', 'illegality', etc. more than on the differentiation of migrants who have already been allowed to stay in the country. This is probably related to the fact that social science often departs from the nation state and national legislation and policies. Analyses of public discourse have found that distinctions between immigrants and natives are powerful and influential (see, e.g., Strömbblad and Myrberg, 2015). My concern here is rather how

the housing needs of certain subcategories of newly arrived refugees are targeted and handled in local policy and practice. Although they cannot impact the right of migrants with residence permits to remain in Sweden, municipal politicians often try to affect how, when, where and if they settle in their own municipality.

Categorisations used in counting and mapping the homeless population are frequently problematised (see, e.g., SOU 2001: 95; Thörn, 2004). For example, it has been questioned why and to what effect some homelessness is hidden from national statistics and whether or not tenants threatened by eviction or residing in transitional housing should be included (Edgar, 2009; Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Foundation Abbé Pierre and FEANTSA, 2019). In Sweden local categorisations of homeless people have been examined and discussed in several doctoral theses (Sahlin, 1996; Löfstrand, 2005; Knutagård, 2009). For instance, Knutagård (2009) studied the development and interaction of homeless categories in the organisation of social work and homeless accommodation in Malmö. He showed how individuals were classified by social workers in relation to specific places and accommodation units, resulting in a 'moral geography'. To categorise homeless people is also a requirement for arranging accommodations according to a 'staircase' model, where advancement to higher steps (with regard to standards, terms and privacy) is conditioned upon personal improvement and consequential re-categorisation (see Sahlin, 1996; Sahlin, 2005). Although this research is relevant for an analysis of homeless policies, this article deals rather with the rough distinction between homeless people with regard to their entitlement to any accommodation through the municipality.

To understand the emergence, establishment and change of local target groups for accommodation I will apply different perspectives on categorisation. The overall design is inspired by Ian Hacking (1986/2006), who has analysed the interaction between categories, institutions, and the categorised and shown the dynamics and movement of categories in use. Further, I will draw on the argument by Charles Tilly (1998), that 'categorical inequality' and existing social inequality are mutually reinforced when administrative, 'internal' categories are linked to societal, 'external' ones. In the same vein Mary Douglas (1986) claims that institutionalised distinctions both depend on and reinforce the legitimacy of such boundaries with the public. Michael Billig (1987), finally, approaches categories as elements of a rhetorical strategy, where references to common values and the option to except sub-categories are used to convince an audience. Discursive responsabilisation (Juhila *et al.*, eds, 2016) is another municipal strategy to avoid accountability. I find these different theoretical entrances helpful for understanding the power and dynamics of categories, subcategories and re-categorisation of homeless people – migrants or not – and their entitlement to accommodation.

## **Policies for Refugee Settling and Homeless Accommodation**

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Policies for refugee reception and settlement are in Sweden formalised from above, through legislation and state funding, but municipalities use their space of discretion to make – and revise – local interpretations of subcategories of migrants with residence permits, as well as of the meaning of ‘settlement’.

Homelessness, on the other hand, has no legal definition or state funding, and it is not in itself clearly associated with any public duties or individual entitlements. Homeless accommodation is quite unregulated, too, apart from general requirements for human habitations and temporarily established local guidelines. While the current Swedish housing policy aims at increased construction of new homes, and housing provision is a local responsibility, allocation of permanent dwellings is mostly left to the market.

### ***The national refugee reception policy in Sweden***

Sweden received many asylum-seeking refugees until the immigration policy was turned around in November 2015, resulting in drastically reduced possibilities to enter the country to apply for asylum, to obtain permanent residence permits and to unite with family members. Today, temporary residence permits are the norm.<sup>4</sup> Combined with various efforts by the EU to hinder entrance to any of its member countries, this has entailed that the number of asylum-seekers in Sweden has decreased from almost 163 000 in 2015 to 21 500 in 2018, and in 2019 only 6540 residence permits were granted to asylum-seekers (The Swedish Migration Agency Statistics). Nevertheless, migration and integration policies in Sweden are subjected to continued heated debates and were important issues in the 2018 election to the Parliament and the municipal councils. Today most political parties claim that refugee migration must be reduced even more and that the newly arrived refugees should be subjected to higher demands and stricter control.<sup>5</sup>

Policies to accommodate refugees vary within the EU. According to Baptista *et al.* (2016), refugees in most member countries are assured equal rights as other residents to the housing market, including to social housing. Denmark stands out, though, as all refugees are assigned to municipalities, which are obliged to provide them with long-term housing (*ibid.*). Sweden has adopted a similar legislation,

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<sup>4</sup> If categorised as refugee, the residence permit lasts three years; if defined as a person in need of subsidiary protection, 13 months.

<sup>5</sup> In August 2019, the Moderate Party suggested that the number of asylum-seekers should be reduced by 70 percent, while the Sweden Democrats require that it be zero. Together, these two rightwing parties obtained 37.4 per cent of the votes in the Parliament election 2018, and on average almost 42 per cent of the votes in the municipal councils in Skåne. However, the Social Democrats, too, have expressed ambitions to work for reduced refugee immigration.

although only for refugees who used to stay in the Migration Agency's reception centres. Since March 2016, municipalities are obliged to receive and provide accommodation for a given number of assigned newly arrived refugees every year. Some of the motives for this Settlement Act (2016: 38) were that the previous voluntary agreements with the municipalities on refugee reception were insufficient, and that the Government wanted to place refugees in towns with relatively good labour markets, even if they did not volunteer as refugee receivers. In addition, it became a tool to even out the differences between towns and cities with many self-settled newly arrived migrants and those who had no or only a few such inhabitants (Gov. Bill 2015/16: 54). Hence, a great number of newly arrived refugees were assigned to municipalities with no experience of refugee reception. In Skåne, a few high-income municipalities with only a small share of rental dwellings have been assigned several hundreds of new inhabitants in recent years.<sup>6</sup>

Unaccompanied children (up to the age of 18) are since 2014 assigned to municipalities for accommodation and care, and the costs are fully reimbursed by the central state. Adult asylum-seekers and their children may stay in reception centres, which about 40 percent do, or arrange their own accommodation, which is more common.<sup>7</sup> When residence permits are granted, the central state retains the economic responsibility during the 'establishment period', which is calculated to last for a couple of years (but often takes longer). Provided that they comply with 'establishment plans' designed by the Public Employment Service, the newly arrived are entitled to an 'establishment allowance', to cover costs for their livelihood and housing. Meanwhile, the municipalities are offered substantial funding for their refugee reception, including administration, language training, housing arrangements, etc. After the establishment period, these migrants are supposed to be sufficiently integrated – settled, employed and Swedish-speaking – and treated as other residents. If they still cannot provide for themselves, they are referred to the social services.

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<sup>6</sup> The number of refugees assigned to the Skåne County was 2 766 in 2016 but will only be 769 in 2020. The yearly number assigned to individual municipalities in the county has varied between 0 and 488 (The Swedish Migration Agency Statistics).

<sup>7</sup> 39 193 asylum-seekers were registered in the Migration Authority's reception system on Feb 1, 2020. Of them, 41% were staying in reception centres, while 56% had arranged accommodation on their own and about 3% were minors assigned to municipalities. Since January 2020, asylum-seekers who choose private accommodation in certain vulnerable residential areas may be deprived of their daily allowances (Gov. Bill 2019/20: 10; Minutes from the Parliament Nov. 27, 2019). In Skåne, four municipalities (including Malmö) have decided that their whole territories should be defined as such 'vulnerable' zones. Hence, possible self-settled refugees from 2020 on are not entitled to any allowances for their subsistence, not from the state, nor from the city.



Although the Settlement Act (2016: 38) and its accompanying ordinance (2016: 39) oblige municipalities to receive assigned refugees for settlement, the Government has failed to define what kind of accommodation or housing is required:

The Government's intention is that the municipalities should as far as possible offer the newly arrived who are covered by the assignments permanent housing. However, it cannot be ruled out that municipalities will have to offer temporary housing to fulfil their obligation. In order not to constrain the flexibility that is necessary for the municipalities' ability to offer accommodation of more temporary nature, the Government considers that it is not appropriate to regulate by law the type of housing intended. (Gov. Bill 2015/16: 54, p.18)

Probably because the idea was permanent housing, the Government also failed to stipulate the time during which the municipalities should provide accommodation or housing for the assigned newly arrived refugees. Hence, the scope for local policy variations is further widened – especially since the Administrative Court of Appeal in Stockholm in February 2019 concluded that evicting received refugees after 24 months was not against the law (Case No. 4155-18).

### ***Local settlement policies***

In Sweden the extreme right movement is strong and represented in both the national Parliament and the municipal councils by 'The Sweden Democrats' (SD), whose main political goal is to stop or reduce immigration – into the country as well as into the municipalities. SD is the biggest party in the council of every third municipality in the Skåne County, and in five of them it is part of the ruling majority. This party's council members are very active and issue similar motions to the councils of most of the county's municipalities, requesting, e.g., that assigned newly arrived should not be received or accommodated, that they should be encouraged to leave town, subjected to an 'integration duty' and evicted from their accommodation as soon as legally possible. In combination with legislative changes and readjustment of state subventions, this political situation has affected the local policies and strategies for refugee settlement in Skåne – directly or indirectly.

'Newly arrived refugees' is actually a legal construction, aimed at demarcating the target group for special establishment measures for refugees in an act adopted in 2010, and subsequently transferred to the 2016 Settlement Act (Gov. Bill 2015/16: 54, p.14). It refers to migrants with residence permits as refugees (or as persons in need of subsidiary protection or quota refugees) and their family members during the establishment period. This definition is of great significance, since it is related to both state subsidies to the municipalities and individual allowances. However,

the distinction between newly arrived who are 'assigned' and 'self-settled', respectively, has proved to be of even greater importance for the municipalities, which are only obliged to accommodate the assigned category.

In our questionnaire, we asked the municipalities what groups were targeted by the local (formal or informal) strategy for accommodating newly arrived migrants. The answers differed quite a lot. All included newly arrived refugees assigned since March 2016 in this policy; 6 municipalities excluded all other migrant groups. According to 2 respondents, refugees assigned according to prior, voluntary agreements were included although by this time (autumn 2018) at least almost three years had passed. Unaccompanied children were targeted in 8 municipalities, and 6 of these included such youths even after they had turned 18, although they are not obliged by law to house them after this age. Available accommodation options stretched from regular permanent tenancies with the municipal housing companies and other local landlords, time-limited sublease contracts for dwellings in existing or modular houses, to shared flats, corridor rooms and caravans.

However, only 2 municipalities stated explicitly that their settlement strategy also included newly arrived who were self-settled, and other responses and comments indicated that if this category of refugees was targeted at all, it would rather be by policies and practice for other homeless people in the municipalities. Many respondents claimed that they did not know the number, needs or actual housing situations of the self-settled households in the municipality. Others provided rather vague answers:

They are lodgers, often short-term solutions. We do not work actively with this group.

There is no information on the housing situation of those self-settled ones after them having received their residence permits. We have no solid knowledge, but the general picture within Malmö City is that a great share of homeless households has a background as self-settled asylum-seekers.

Most of the self-settled ones in the municipality manage on their own and we get to know about them only when they have children that need day-care or school or if they need any help with livelihood support.

A third subcategory of 'newly arrived' comprises re-uniting family members of assigned refugees. According to a more recent survey, only 3 out of 18 responding municipalities in the county arrange accommodation for them (Skåne County Adm., 2019: 31). From focus group discussions we have learned that several municipalities do not believe, or accept, that they are obliged to arrange accommodation for these

family members when they arrive to the municipalities. Instead, they ascribe this responsibility to the individual that was assigned first – even if this is an unaccompanied child or someone who is prohibited from having lodgers.

Although the state subsidies for municipal reception are quite generous, some of the municipalities in Skåne have objected to the obligation to accommodate assigned refugees, and/or protracted the receiving of them, mostly with reference to local shortage of rental housing. Considering the relatively indistinct and ambiguous legislation, it is no surprise that the municipalities, in addition, interpret their obligations and responsibilities, as well as the concerned individuals' rights and entitlements, differently. Several accommodation coordinators claim that they themselves have had to sort out what they must do and what they can do. Board proceedings confirm that these officials are often squeezed between the law and the local politicians. Furthermore, it is obvious that several municipalities have recently changed their policies, primarily resulting in reduced ambitions regarding the duration, standards and target groups for refugee settlement.

### ***National housing and homeless policies***

Despite increased housing construction in recent years, a great majority (83 per cent) of the municipalities in Sweden suffer from severe shortage of rental housing, especially affordable housing, according to the National Board for Housing, Building and Planning (NBHBP, 2019). The prices for owner-occupied housing have risen substantially in the last decade and a growing share of the population cannot buy their dwellings, nor pay the rents of new-built homes (ibid.).<sup>8</sup>

Sweden's housing policy has changed dramatically in recent decades. Public housing – owned by municipal housing companies (MHCs) – comprises only about 15 per cent of the dwellings, somewhat less than the private rental sector, while the remaining 65–70 per cent are owner-occupied (Statistics Sweden). Since 2007, rents in new or newly renovated rental housing are set by the market for the first 15 years (so-called presumption rents), while rents for existing flats are collectively negotiated and related to the dwellings' standard, size and site. There is no social housing in Sweden, but a growing secondary housing market (NBHBP, 2019), where the municipalities rent flats and then sublease them to homeless clients on special terms and without security of tenure. Public housing in Sweden does not target the underprivileged strata of the population and is by law required to act 'business-like' since 2011. The combined effect of these two reforms is that many MHCs choose

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<sup>8</sup> Severe difficulties for employers and universities to recruit employees and students outside their commuting area are nowadays described as a serious threat to the national economy (Gov. Bill 2019/20: 1, p. 34).

to build flats of kinds and in sites where they can attract high-income people willing and able to pay high rents (Grander, 2018; Grander, 2019). But here, too, policies vary between municipalities.

All municipalities are obliged to plan for provision of housing to their residents, and since 2014 these plans should contain an analysis of the needs of 'special groups', which include newly arrived migrants as well as homeless persons. Even though certain new subventions for housing constructions require that the municipal councils adopt guidelines for housing provision, there are still no sanctions attached to municipalities' omissions to do so, or to implement adopted plans. However, in most municipalities in Skåne these requirements have entailed some investigation of the housing situations and needs of the concerned groups.

There is no national homeless policy in Sweden, and no right to housing, besides for people with severe and lasting disabilities who have a legal right to specially adapted dwellings. The National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) maps the number of homeless people known by the social services, NGOs and hospitals, etc. (excluding EU-migrants, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants) every sixth year – the last count was made in April 2017 (NBHW, 2017). The obligation to support and accommodate homeless people is generically regulated in the Social Services Act (SSA), which states the following:

Persons unable to provide for their needs or to obtain provision for them in any other way are entitled to assistance from the social welfare committee towards their livelihood (livelihood support) and for their living in general.

Through the assistance, the individual shall be assured of a reasonable standard of living. The assistance shall be designed in such a way as to strengthen his or her resources for independent living. (Ch. 4, Section 1)

Although this section of the act has not changed since 1980, and a few verdicts of the Supreme Administrative Court indicate that a 'reasonable standard of living' includes a regular, self-contained flat, the Administrative Courts of Appeal have in recent years frequently come to other conclusions. Whether or not housing or accommodation is a necessary ingredient in a reasonable standard of living is therefore, in practice, to a high extent up to the judgements of local professionals, politicians and the administrative courts.

Besides the rights of the individual to social support, as quoted above, the municipality has the "ultimate responsibility for ensuring that persons staying within its boundaries receive the support and assistance they need" (SSA, Ch. 2, Section 1). Whether or not this implies that homeless people – and if so, what kind of homeless households – are entitled to (or the municipality obliged to provide) temporary

accommodation or even long-term housing, is recurrently debated. Other sections of the SSA state that the social services should especially consider the situation of children, elderly people, certain victims of crime and substance abusers.

### ***Local homelessness policies***

In our survey, 24 municipalities responded to the question on whether or not the municipality had a policy or action plan to counteract homelessness and provide housing for homeless people. Eight said yes, and 16 said no – but half of the latter still described a practice that could have been formalised as a policy. Many claimed that they cooperated with the MHC and offered sub-leased flats with special contracts, i.e. without any security of tenure. Another common option was ‘emergency flats’ for short-term accommodation, and some had training flats and/or some kind of shelter. Bigger towns usually reported more tiers of accommodation and sometimes a limited Housing First project, while smaller municipalities had less alternatives. From their accounts of the current housing situation of local homeless people, it was clear that the respondents’ knowledge was often significantly better on this category than regarding self-settled newly arrived refugees.

So far, the results of this research seem to confirm that the self-settled newly arrived, the assigned ones, and other homeless people are differently targeted by local policies, although the self-settled ones are in some places subsumed in the group of ‘other homeless people’ and a few municipalities have begun to integrate the administration of accommodation for assigned refugees and other homeless people. However, if assigned refugees move to another municipality they will be defined as self-settled, and the category ‘newly arrived’ is temporary by definition: If people have not obtained long-term housing while included in it, they may be re-categorised as ‘other homeless’ afterwards.

### **Moving the Target Group through Re-categorisation**

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Laws, rules and guidelines on support and services tend to shape a specific kind of what Tilly (1998) calls ‘categorical pairs’, where one party is entitled or targeted and the other one not. The classical example is of course deserving versus non-deserving poor. Formal distinctions and classifications, in turn, affect our views of people, which is captured by Mary Douglas (1986) in her thesis that institutions ‘think’ for us.

Who shall be saved and who shall die is settled by institutions. /... / An answer is only seen to be the right one if it sustains the institutional thinking that is already in the minds of individuals as they try to decide. (Douglas, 1986: 4).

This kind of institutional categorisation through division will now be illustrated by the current splitting of the previous target group for homeless accommodation in Malmö.

### ***From cause to category: 'structurally homeless'***

It is a common understanding that homelessness has structural causes in terms of economic inequality, shortage of (affordable) housing or tight housing markets on the one hand, and that individual vulnerability increases the risk to actually become and remain homeless, on the other. In research, structural causes are distinguished from individual ones, but they are rarely viewed as mutually exclusive or unrelated (see, e.g., Fitzpatrick, 2005; Pleace, 2016). Lately, however, a strange discourse has emerged, for example in Malmö, where 'social' homelessness is distinguished from 'structural' homelessness, as if these terms refer to completely different situations and groups of people. 'Structurally homeless' is claimed to indicate not only that the individual would not have been homeless given that the supply and allocation of housing had been different, but also that the person has no 'social problems' and no need of any special support, monitoring or help. 'Socially homeless', on the other hand, stands for individuals with 'special difficulties' to obtain housing due to substance abuse, mental health problems and similar attributes and who need social support to acquire and manage in a home. These are problems and people that the social services are used to handle and treat; they are traditional targets for social work. But how did these new homeless categories emerge and why? And who are being categorised as 'structurally homeless' and with what consequences?

According to an interviewed official in Malmö social services, the concept 'structural homelessness' was originally developed within the social services about ten years ago to highlight that shortage of housing was a significant cause of homelessness, which must be addressed at the national level or by the city as a whole. Nevertheless, it has now become synonymous with 'not having special difficulties to find housing' – and subsequently with not being entitled to accommodation through the social services.

This translation from cause to category is odd in many ways. It is not found in the SSA or any state investigation. If a similar reasoning were applied to unemployment, a great share of the households receiving social assistance for their subsistence would have been defined as not eligible, because their poverty was caused by structural unemployment and not by specific, individual difficulties to find work. But this would be clearly at odds with the whole welfare system, which is based on the principle that the municipal social services should function as a safety net for those whose needs are not covered by regular income, social insurance or families. In 2018, about half of the households who received social welfare in Sweden were able to work but unemployed, and "unemployment is since 2010 the main reason why people cannot support themselves" (NBHW, 2019, p.1).

In spring 2019, the local social authorities of two of the biggest cities in Sweden, Göteborg and Malmö, adopted new guidelines for housing assistance to homeless people.<sup>9</sup> These underline that the social services are not responsible for organising accommodation to 'structurally homeless' people, and that such households will in the future be offered temporary accommodation only in emergency situations, and if so, no longer than for one week.<sup>10</sup> The distinction is sharp and absolute; households will be categorised as either 'structurally' or 'socially' homeless. This revision of the policy targets is triggered by the social services' ambitions to reduce their increasing costs for shelters and hostels through delimiting their target group. However, no other local or national authority accepts responsibility for the supply and allocation of housing or accommodation for those who are categorised as 'structurally homeless'. One has to wait many years to get an offer of a dwelling through the housing queue of Malmö, no one gets precedence and many fail to meet the landlords' requirements anyway.

*Who are the 'structurally homeless'?*

*'We have almost only single people who are "social" – at least in this part of the city. And our families, we have a lot of "structural" families.'* (Social worker in Malmö)

In Malmö's new guidelines for homeless accommodation, this category is negatively defined as those who do not meet the following requirements for being entitled to accommodation:

**... both criteria must be met:**

- being **totally homeless** (roofless)
- having **special difficulties** to obtain a dwelling of one's own (refers to special difficulties for the individual, not to those general difficulties that prevail in a municipality with severe housing shortage) (Emphasis in the original. Malmö City 2019a, p.1).

<sup>9</sup> According to Samzelius (forthcoming), the same policy is used by Stockholm City and its suburbs, although it has not been formally articulated and adopted.

<sup>10</sup> Homeless people with mental health problems, substance abuse or a history of previous evictions used to be refused long-term housing through the local social authorities, since they were assumed to be 'incapable of independent living' (Sahlin, 1996). It is ironic that these groups are now prioritised on the very same ground, namely, that they are incapable of (acquiring) independent living without support. As soon as they become 'capable', they now risk being re-defined as 'structurally homeless' and deprived of further help. Another irony is that no social support is actually provided at the accommodations that are now in principle preserved for 'socially homeless' people.

An interviewed social worker claims that today, 'it's super, super, super-strict requirements for being 'social' and exemplifies with a homeless man with substance abuse, depression, a history of evictions and/or recently released from prison, but who is still not categorised as 'social'. However, statistical evidence suggests that the "structurally homeless" category, in practice, predominantly applies to other homeless groups in the city.

According to the city's own mappings, the homeless population doubled and its composition changed significantly between 2010 and 2018; "the structural homelessness and homelessness among persons with children have grown significantly during this period of time" (Malmö City, 2019b, p.8). Of the almost 2000 adults recorded as homeless in October 2018 (ibid., p.16), 71.5 per cent were born abroad; whereof half (696 individuals) had been in Sweden less than three years at the time of counting. Hence, they were self-settled in the city. The cause of their homelessness was their unstable and deficient economic situation (ibid., p.11), i.e. 'structural'.

Homeless persons living with children are almost always structurally homeless. This holds for 97% of all parents in the mapping. This means that they do not have any known problems like substance abuse and/or mental ill-health. (ibid., p.14)

More than 92 per cent of the homeless parents of 1 374 minor children staying with them, were born abroad (ibid., p.13), and many were women: "Women in homelessness live with their children to a higher extent than men and they are also structurally homeless in a higher degree than men" (ibid., p.8). The city's settlement policy is to provide accommodation for assigned newly arrived refugees up to four years, so members of this category are not (yet) included in the homeless counts. Homeless people without residence permits are also excluded from the mappings. Taken together, this information indicates that 'structurally homeless' is almost synonymous with self-settled, often newly arrived refugees, who stay with their minor children in temporary shelters and hostels.<sup>11</sup>

With the new guidelines, however, things have changed rapidly. In November 2019, the social services administration released a press report (Malmö City, 2019c), with diagrams and tables that evidenced a dramatic reduction of structural homelessness in the past year. At the same time, the number of temporarily accommodated families with minor children more than halved (ibid., p.3). The following table is based on figures from the mappings on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2018 and 2019, respectively:

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<sup>11</sup> Single adults without 'social problems' have probably already been denied support to accommodation and therefore been excluded from the social services' counts of local homeless people.



**Table 1. Categories of homeless people in the mappings of Malmö on October 1, 2018 and 2019, respectively.**

Kind of household/individual	Oct. 1, 2018	Oct. 1, 2019	Change
Homeless adults	1 959	1 355	- 604
Whereof...			
born in Sweden	560	548	- 12
born abroad	1 399	807	- 592
<i>whereof</i>			
<i>in Sweden 0–3 years</i>	449	184	- 265
structurally homeless	1 337	727	- 610
socially homeless	622	628	+ 6
Homeless fam. with children	509	251	- 258
Homeless children	1 347	692	- 655

Sources: Malmö City, 2019b, 2019c.

It is quite obvious that the subcategories of homeless people who had some kind of temporary accommodation through the social services in 2018, but not in 2019, are those born abroad (often self-settled newly arrived), with children and defined as structurally homeless. There is no information available on where these families stay today, but only a minority seems to have succeeded to find permanent housing.<sup>12</sup>

In the guidelines excluding the 'structurally homeless' from support to accommodation in Malmö, the point of departure is that "the social services are no housing allocation agency" but specialised on dealing with individuals with specific 'social' problems. They accept no responsibility for the excluded 'structurals'. Because of this, the rejected homeless individuals and families are to a growing extent also excluded from the mappings of homelessness in Malmö City.

## Making Categorical Exclusions Legitimate

Institutional decisions and distinctions require, and at the same time confer, legitimacy (Douglas, 1986). Through defining one category as in need and having a specific right, the other one in the categorical pair will appear as clearly different also in other respects. Put differently, we tend to ascribe the non-entitled category further attributes that reinforce and help motivate the institutional division between them (Sahlin, 1994). Once such distinctions are established, it is tempting to identify the individuals who are placed at different sides of the border with the average of the category of relevance or, alternatively, with stereotypical images of category

<sup>12</sup> An investigation in another municipality revealed that a great number of structurally homeless families had moved in from other municipalities in the Skåne county. They had paid brokers and landlords for rental contracts – which is illegal – for inadequate housing with very high rents. Although they were severely indebted and felt deceived, they were too scared to report their situation to the authorities (Tingne, 2018).

members as 'good' or 'bad', respectively. Accordingly, the non-eligible homeless may be identified either with the average home-seeker, who has acceptable housing but maybe not the perfect dwelling, or with the stereotype of outsiders, who are perceived as extremely strange or even as a threat to the local community (cf. Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994). The point is that none of these types deserves sympathy or help. It is precisely through exaggerating the differences between the targeted ones and those who are not entitled to help, that the distinction becomes legitimate and natural. In addition, such accounts help the decision-makers to counteract and hamper experiences of ambivalence and doubt (cf. Festinger, 1957).

In *Durable Inequality*, Charles Tilly (1998) puts forward another quality that bestows legitimacy. He claims that 'categorical inequality' tends to be lasting if it is in accordance with general societal distinctions such as gender, race and nationality. As shown above, the new 'internal' categorical pair of 'structurally' versus 'socially' homeless people coincides to a great extent with the 'external' pair of Swedes versus 'migrants/aliens'.

It is nevertheless remarkable that in Malmö, homeless women (born abroad) and their children by now are judged to be less 'deserving' than, e.g., homeless single men (born in Sweden) with substance abuse or mental health problems. The new categorical distinction between 'structurally' and 'socially' homeless is obviously at odds with the historically strong social norm that women – especially mothers – and children should be protected by society. Adults in general – and men in particular – are mostly viewed as less vulnerable and more responsible for their problematic situation. Indeed, in the local practices of settling assigned refugees, families with children are often offered better temporary housing than single adults (usually young men), who tend to be placed in collective accommodation where they have to share bathroom and kitchen with others. Hence, the target move involves not only a re-categorisation based on causes of homelessness, but also that 'vulnerability' is replaced by 'special difficulties' as the main criterion for deserving support and that the definition of 'homeless' is narrowed down to 'roofless'.

Michael Billig (1987) has a different approach to 'categorisation', which he views as a strategy of rhetoric. His thesis is that categories, combined with 'particularisations' – that is, examples and exceptions – are created and invoked with the aim to convince an audience of the logic and righteousness of a political distinction or a legal verdict. The move of the target for assistance to housing or emergency accommodation is an interesting example of what he names "the strategy of the special case" (ibid.: 173 ff.). According to the SSA's general section on the right to assistance, including to housing (see above), persons who are "unable to provide for their needs or to obtain provision for them in any other way are entitled to assistance". In appeal cases, this is always quoted by the Administrative Courts,

followed by the statement that this does not mean that homeless people in general has a right to housing, but only those who are *completely* homeless and have *special* difficulties. Although the courts do not use the term 'socially' homeless, this particularisation has now become established – support to accommodation is no general right for homeless people, only the special case may be entitled to it.

'Special difficulties', in turn, has been elaborated in the Malmö guidelines through a list of particularities that are judged as *not* being special.

If the person is affected only by the housing shortage in Malmö with surroundings, or cannot speak Swedish, alternatively cannot apply for housing via Internet, s/he does not belong to a group that according to court praxis is considered to have special difficulties. A deficient economy, which makes it difficult to live up to a landlord's requirements or to get any offer at all through a housing queue is not a reason in itself, either. Nor is being an unaccompanied youth with a temporary residence permit /... / in itself a reason to get assistance to housing. (Malmö 2019a, p. 1f.)

Thus, the category 'special difficulties' is combined with a number of particularisations that are exempt from it. It is like a Russian doll: problem after problem is exempted, until the core of the eligible category is hardly discernible. "Particularities are invoked in order to shift the essence away from one set of social values to another set", claims Billig (1987, p.175); in this case from the needs and rights of the homeless persons to their theoretical ability to obtain housing on their own. Only very severe difficulties qualify as 'special'.

What is radically new with the structural versus social homeless categories of Malmö, however, is the non-consideration of children as a vulnerable group (Björkhagen Turesson, 2019; Samzelius, forthcoming). While it is quite common in Skåne's municipalities to delimit the target group for housing assistance and provision of temporary accommodation, guidelines for the social services often include a particularisation concerning children.

If a family can manage an accommodation, that is, pay the rent in time, not disturb their neighbours and handle an apartment on their own without support, it is an indication that the right to assistance in the form of housing can be called into question. This does not, however, preclude that assistance can be provided on the basis of a child perspective in order to prevent an emergency situation or based on an individual assessment in cases with social problems. (Osby Municipality, 2018, p. 5)

If the person who applies for assistance to housing has children, special regard shall be taken to them and to the possible consequences of denied assistance. (Skurup Municipality, 2015, p. 39)

## Moving the Target through Removing Responsibility

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When things go wrong or are questioned, or when criticism is voiced or anticipated, we all use accounts as defence (Scott and Lyman, 1968). These do not work unless the values that we invoke are shared with those to whom we address our excuses and justifications. Likewise, categorisations and particularisations rely on, and are rhetorically combined with, references to common public values (Billig, 1987).

Allocating responsibility while invoking public values appears to be central in arguing for narrowing target groups for homeless accommodation and reduced ambitions in refugee settling. Politicians would rarely deny that the situation as homeless is difficult, but rather ascribe the responsibility for the hardship to somebody else. In a local 'integration plan', adopted in March, 2019, by the council of Staffanstorp's municipality in Skåne, the following is the only mentioning of housing for newly arrived migrants:

Accommodation for newly arrived refugees shall be organised in an economically justifiable manner and no special precedence in housing queues or the like shall prevail. During the establishment period, which is two years, the newly arrived are responsible for finding their own housing. The municipality's responsibility ceases after the establishment period.

Despite the legal obligation, this municipality declares that the target and essence of its integration policy are not to provide housing for the newly arrived, but rather to see that their accommodation does not imply any costs or disadvantages to other inhabitants of the municipality. The refugees' own responsibility is underlined, while the municipality's responsibility is but defined in negative terms – what it does not include and when it does not apply. There is an explicit reference to the value of sound municipal finances ('an economically justifiable manner') and an implicit reference to the value of an unregulated housing market ('no special precedence'). Indirectly, the newly arrived are positioned as a threat to both of these values – why else would these principles be highlighted in this context?

In May 2019, the same municipality adopted a 'housing strategy' for accommodating the assigned newly arrived, which replaced a three years older plan. A comparison between the two documents (Staffanstorp Municipality, 2016; Staffanstorp Municipality, 2019b) reveals that the general goal in the 2016 strategy that housing for the newly arrived "should reinforce and facilitate the process of integration" has been removed in the 2019 version, which, in turn has a new amendment:

Staffanstorp Municipality has no own dwellings to offer newly arrived. There are few alternative dwellings available on the housing market. When there are no other solutions, the newly arrived are offered temporary emergency accommodation through the social services. This may be in other municipalities.

The municipality offers one single accommodation alternative. If the newly arrived chooses to reject this, the whole responsibility to find housing rests with the newly arrived.

Again, the responsibility of the municipality is only defined in negative terms. This non-accountability is first excused with reference to a housing market that is presented as an external circumstance with an objective modality, i.e. as an absolute fact (Fairclough, 2003), “has no own dwellings”, “there are few alternative dwellings”, “when there are no other solutions” – no one seems responsible for this situation, and no agent is indicated. In this way the situation is excused, although the presented ‘facts’ result from conscious political decisions: Staffanstorps Municipality has sold its MHC to a private company, hardly built any rental flats in the past decades and declined to plan for housing provision for the assigned refugees.

In the second paragraph of the quote, the non-responsibility is justified with reference to an anticipated discontent and ungratefulness of the assigned refugees, who are made accountable for their absolute homelessness in case they do not accept the municipality’s only alternative – which may be a bed in a shared caravan outside the town.<sup>13</sup> Through this wording, the municipality’s rejection of its obligations to plan for housing provision and to accommodate assigned refugees is effectively both excused and justified (Scott and Lyman, 1968), while the homeless refugees are responsibilised.

## **From Category to Cause: Children Homeless due to Failed Parenting**

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The dramatic decline of the number of homeless families in Malmö in the past year, as shown in Table 1 above, was almost exclusively due to a reduction of structurally homeless migrant families. However, on October 1, 2019, there were still 692 children registered as homeless. Of these, 671 have been categorised as belonging to ‘structurally homeless’ households. What does this imply for the homeless children?

As part of the research project *Scanian Homes*, we are following the implementation of the new guidelines for homeless accommodation in one district in Malmö since September 2019.<sup>14</sup> This partial study includes repeated interviews with social

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<sup>13</sup> This municipality has gained certain disrepute for placing assigned refugees in shared caravans on a field near the dump outside the town, or in other municipalities (*Sydsvenskan*, March 1, 2018). In a number of motions, the SD party suggests that other municipalities in Skåne adopt ‘the Staffanstorps model’ of refugee accommodation.

<sup>14</sup> The social services in Malmö – a city of 344 000 inhabitants – are divided into five geographical areas or districts.

workers divided off to handle 'structurally homeless' clients, observations of their encounters with clients and analyses of their decisions. Most of their clients are migrant families with several children, staying in emergency accommodation of 1–2 rooms, often sharing kitchen and bathroom with other households. Every week the parents must come to the office and prove that they are still in an emergency situation, despite evidenced efforts to find some private accommodation through Facebook, other online trading sites or informal networks. If they are accepted as tenants or lodgers, even if it is only for a few days and in another town, they are denied further emergency accommodation. However, because of low income, the size of the household, or their inability to pay the deposit fee or the extra sum of money that landlords often require (Tingne, 2018; Wahlgren and Paulsson, 2020), they are usually not accepted as tenants. Hence, they are allowed to stay in emergency accommodation yet another week.

The social workers do not deliberately move these families around, yet they sometimes have to shift accommodation due to changed, ceased or violated agreements between the social services and the shelter providers. "They can move you tomorrow and you have to obey", says a single mother. On the other hand, decision records reveal that several families remain in highly inadequate and insecure emergency accommodation month after month. Unfortunately, we have only been able to interview a few of the client families so far. Still, we have learned that these 'structurally' homeless families often suffer from overcrowding, persistent insecurity, and consequential difficulties for all family members to focus on other tasks, such as school, work, job-seeking and language training.

To design a policy that relieves the municipality from the responsibility for newly arrived refugees is one thing, but to reject the general societal obligation to care for children in need requires additional discursive efforts (Liebenberg *et al.*, 2015). The new guidelines for homeless accommodation in Göteborg state:

... the child perspective must always be considered departing from the parents' ability to plan for and solve the housing situation. If needed, notify the Child and Family Department on your concerns. (Göteborg City, 2019, p.7)

The Child and Family Department does not deal with housing but with assessing 'parental capacity' and children's possible need of foster care. Likewise, the social workers in Malmö convey that if a structurally homeless family invokes the children's needs, such claims are usually dismissed through phrases like: "As parents, you have the full responsibility for your children's housing".

In the conceptual frame of Billig (1987), the essence of the particularisation 'homeless children' is neither homelessness, nor children's rights or needs, but rather 'parental deficiencies'. In this way, the shared public value that children is a

vulnerable group that society must care for and protect and that authorities must ensure their rights, is discursively defended. Despite the fact that the cause of these families' homelessness is defined as purely structural, the children's homelessness is blamed on their parents' shortcomings.

## Concluding Discussion

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Since 2016 the municipalities in Sweden are obliged by law to accommodate assigned newly arrived refugees and to organise reception of them as well as of self-settled newly arrived. Homelessness, on the other hand, is by tradition unregulated and a wholly local issue. The local accommodation policies for all three groups vary within and among municipalities, but also over time. This article has probed into and reflected on how the targets and target groups of such municipal policies are moved through categorisations, re-categorisations and responsabilisation.

Although the intention with the Settlement Act was that assigned newly arrived refugees should obtain permanent housing, some municipalities in Skåne offer this target group but temporary accommodation for two years. I have demonstrated how one of them has revised its strategy for integration and refugee accommodation and discursively transferred this responsibility to the newly arrived themselves. At the same time, the target to integrate and accommodate newly arrived refugees has been replaced by an ambition to avoid immigration to the municipality.

The on-going policy changes and re-definitions of targets and target groups result from continuous interaction between public institutions at different levels, such as the municipal departments, political boards, the administrative courts and – at the level of the central state – the Government, the Migration Agency and the Parliament (cf Hacking, 1986/2006).<sup>15</sup> These policies and their revisions make use of rhetorical strategies and arguments, which involve (re-)categorisations, particularisations as well as appeals to public values (cf Billig, 1987).

In most municipalities in Skåne, self-settled newly arrived refugees are excluded from the target groups of accommodation for both refugees and homeless people. However, if they or the assigned refugees after the establishment period have failed to find housing, they may be re-categorised as 'homeless'. When homelessness and the costs for temporary accommodation grow, while the housing market remains tight, a municipality may react through narrowing its target groups for homeless accommodation. This strategy has been exemplified by Malmö City's

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<sup>15</sup> Local landlords, including MHCs, also play a part through their requirements on new tenants regarding income, employment, maximum number of children, personal references, etc. but have not been considered here.

new guidelines, stating that only 'socially homeless' will be accommodated and supported. People who are homeless due to structural conditions, such as housing shortage and poverty, are defined as 'structurally homeless' and not entitled to any accommodation through the social services, apart from emergency shelter for – at most – one week at a time.

Since the 1990s, the 'housing staircase' is widespread in Sweden as a model for stepwise advancement into the regular housing market. Elsewhere and previously, I have criticized it, because it implies that the causes of homelessness rest with the individuals, and because it rarely works as intended – and even when it does, it implies many moves and a very long time spent in insecure housing (Sahlin, 1996; Sahlin, 2005). I always imagined that the alternative would be 'Housing First', or at least 'Housing Fast' through reforms in housing policy and housing allocation systems. However, the new model for accommodation of structurally homeless is quite the opposite. Although it formally frees the homeless individuals from being blamed for their housing problems, it gives them the whole responsibility to solve them: No matter how well they demonstrate their 'capability of independent living' and good tenant behaviour and their severe needs, there is no hope for housing through the municipality. Instead, they are either stuck on the lowest step of the demolished housing staircase, or squeezed out into the black market of private, expensive, inadequate and insecure accommodation.

The new guidelines of Malmö have implied a re-structuring of the supply of homeless accommodation. Instead of ordinary flats, subleased on special terms with the possible future transition to first-hand contracts of the same dwelling, the city now demands more emergency accommodation, with rooms let on a day-by-day basis without any lease or support, since this is supposed to motivate the structurally homeless to seek and accept any other kind of accommodation. However, emergency accommodation is generally much more expensive for the social services that have to pay market prices for the needed premises instead of ordinary, regulated rents, so the financial gain of the new order remains uncertain.

The child perspective is in most places still valid in the allocation of temporary accommodation for assigned refugees during the establishment period, implying that families more often than singles get access to self-contained flats. However, in the revised homelessness policy of Malmö it is overrun by the distinction between 'structurally' and 'socially' homeless. By now, single men with severe substance abuse problems are offered more secure accommodation than structurally homeless children. According to Tilly (1998), new hierarchies and distinctions may settle as natural in people's minds and institutions and become durable if they



harmonise with existing external inequalities. Since the 'structurals' almost exclusively are refugee families with minor children, the new guidelines are in line with the external, popular distinction between Swedes and migrants.

In addition, the responsibility for children's accommodation is transferred from the municipality to the homeless parents. The reasoning behind the new category 'structurally homeless' is that the cause of homelessness is not found in the individual's behaviour and actions, but in societal structures, poverty, housing shortage, etc. Nevertheless, the structurally homeless are made accountable for their children's homelessness, which is claimed to be due to parental deficiencies. In policies and guidelines, as well as in social workers' explanations to rejected applicants, local authorities account for their omission to provide housing for homeless children through putting the blame on their parents.

In other words, the target to reduce homelessness – not identified at the national level but often at the local level – is moving. Most municipalities aim at reducing the number of homeless individuals, but not necessarily through housing provision. Other ways to achieve such a goal is to abstain from building rental housing, stop offering or paying for such accommodation, or force or convince people to leave town. When they are no longer registered as clients with the social services they will not be counted as homeless. The described changes of categories and targets also entail forced or voluntary physical moves of the re-categorised ones to other places and other accommodation (if any), as these become rejected, evicted or encouraged to move from the accommodation they have enjoyed so far.

However, this worrying transformation and limitation of local homeless and settlement policies does not involve all of the Skåne county. Although it is unusual to include self-settled newly arrived in policies and practice, several municipalities have a rather different approach and honour the child perspective in their efforts to counteract homelessness as well as to settle assigned refugees. Some of them view, at least in principle, all homeless people without own resources as their target group for housing and accommodation, and a few of them manage to provide permanent housing to most of their newly arrived refugees. This indicates that the revisions and moves of target and target groups discussed in this article are not necessary or inevitable but the result of political decisions and priorities that are possible to change.

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