

Between morality and evidence : Social work with homeless people in Sweden

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Between morality and evidence – Social work with homeless people in Sweden

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Introduction

Homelessness is a growing global problem. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2021), 1.6 billion people around the world lack adequate housing. Homelessness not only affects poor countries, but also many wealthy countries have problems with homelessness. Within the European Union, more than 700,000 people are currently sleeping rough or living in shelters or other types of emergency accommodations, which means an increase of 70 percent since 2010 (FEANTSA 2020). Homelessness produces and reinforces social exclusion (Arnold 2004). Homeless people are at risk of reduced life expectancy, physical and mental health problems, discrimination, isolation, but also difficulties in finding work and access to education and public services (FEANTSA 2020; Knutagård et al. 2020). The main reason for homelessness is that there is a shortage of housing available to people with low incomes (Knutagård et al. 2020). The increase in homelessness that occurs in a large part of the world is linked to an increase in poverty and other forms of economic inequality (Baptista &

Marlier 2019).

Counteracting homelessness requires housing policy initiatives that make it possible also for people with low incomes to have access to safe and stable housing. This implies major political and economic challenges. At the same time, the people who are homeless must receive help and social support to solve their housing situation. The organization of social work for homeless people looks different in different countries. This could be, for example, shelters or other forms of emergency accommodations and social housing (Knutagård et al. 2020).

In recent decades, the Housing First model has received much attention in discussions about how to combat homelessness. Housing First was developed for chronically homeless people who suffer from mental and physical illness and drug abuse by the non-profit organization Pathways to Housing, which was founded by Sam Tsemberis in New York in 1992. Today, there are Housing First programs in several countries around the world (Atherton & McNaughton Nicholls, 2008; Pleace, 2012).

Housing First is a successful method. Research from USA and Europe shows that 80 percent of the people who receive Housing First get out of homelessness (Tsemberis, Gulcur & Nakae 2004; Busch-Geertsema, 2005; Pearson, Montgomery & Locke 2009; Taino & Fredriksson, 2009; Pleace 2012; Knutagård & Kristiansen 2018). There are also studies which show that Housing First is cost-effective compared to other methods. (Lariemer et al. 2009; Pleace, 2012).

An important principle for Housing First is that an own stable housing is a basic human right and a prerequisite for a social integrated life. Housing First emphasizes the importance of treating homeless people with respect,

warmth and compassion and that they are offered support as long as they need it. The apartments in Housing First must be spread out in the community in ordinary residential areas and housing and service should be separated. Other important basic principles for Housing First approach are consumer choice and self-determination, recovery orientation and harm reduction (Pleace 2012; Knutagård et al. 2020).

Housing First differs significantly from traditional social work with homeless people, which often is based on the so-called Housing staircase model. The Housing staircase model is based on the principle that homeless people need treatment for various social problems in order to gradually qualify to be able to manage an own home. In services that are based on the Housing staircase model, the service users self-determination is limited and they often include different types of requirements, such as sobriety.

Unlike Housing First, the Housing staircase model lacks evidence. Several studies show that the Housing staircase model rarely supports people in breaking away from homelessness, but instead they get stuck in various temporary housing solutions, which complicates their social integration (Sahlin 1996, 2000; Knutagård 2009; Knutagård et al. 2020).

The purpose of this article is to give a brief overview of the homelessness situation in Sweden and how social work with homeless people is organized, but I will also describe and discuss the implementation of Housing First in Sweden which has been more problematic than in many other countries despite Housing First is an evidence-based and cost-effective method to counteract homelessness. The discussion about the implementation of Housing First is based on Pierson's (2002) theory on path dependence, but I also use a social constructivist approach (Ayukawa 2019; Sahlin 1996) to illustrate

how moral aspects hinder a development towards evidence-based social work with homeless people.

Homelessness in Sweden

In Sweden and in many other European countries, there have been major changes in housing policy since the early 1990s, where the state has reduced its responsibility for providing housing and instead made it a matter for the housing market. This housing policy has benefited groups with good incomes but has led to serious problems with a shortage of housing with reasonable rents for groups with low incomes (Knutagård & Kristiansen 2013; 2018). Today, 212 of Sweden's 290 municipalities have a shortage of housing for people with low incomes (Boverket 2020). From being a problem that was primarily associated with male drug abusers in big cities, today several other groups (e.g. women, children) in Sweden are affected by homelessness and it is no longer just a metropolitan problem.

Homelessness is a serious and growing societal problem in Sweden, which generates large costs both humanly and socio-economically (Kristiansen 2013; Knutagård et al. 2020). In comparison with its neighboring countries Denmark, Norway and Finland, Sweden has twice as many homeless people per 1,000 inhabitants. This can be explained by the fact that in Denmark, Norway and Finland, the state and municipalities take greater responsibility for counteracting homelessness (Knutagård et al. 2020). The increased homelessness entails increased financial costs for the municipalities. According to the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, which is a central government authority, homelessness cost the Swedish municipalities 5.3 billion in 2015 (Boverket 2015).

The National Board of Health and Welfare, which is an authority under the Swedish government, conducts national surveys of homelessness every six years since 1993. The survey conducted in 2017 showed that there were 32,398 people registered as homeless in Sweden, which means a tripling compared to the survey conducted in 1993 (National Board of Health and Welfare 2018; Knutagård et al. 2020). Within this group, 5,935 persons were in acute homelessness (e.g. rough sleepers, living in different types of emergency accommodations). 4,899 persons were incarcerated in prison or other institutions and were to be discharged within three months but lacked housing. 15,838 were living in housing organized by the social services, (e.g. apartments with time-limited social contracts). 5,726 were persons with short-term subleases in other persons homes or involuntary living arrangements with family members or friends without lease. The survey from 2017 showed that homelessness among women and people with a foreign background is increasing. The result from the 2017 survey is, however, an underestimation, as 20 percent of the municipalities did not answer the survey and that the survey only includes homeless people who had contact with social services, health care or non-profit organizations, which means that several vulnerable groups are not included in the survey, for example undocumented persons and asylum seekers (Knutagård et al. 2020).

Social work with homeless people in Sweden

In Sweden, the social service in the municipalities are responsible for the social work with the homeless. Legally, the social service is based on the Social Services Act, but the municipalities have great freedom to organize their social service based on their own conditions. In most municipalities, there

are various activities to provide support to homeless people, such as emergency housing, group housing and community day centres. In some municipalities, there are also eviction prevention activities and housing counselling. Many municipalities cooperate with private companies and non-profit organizations who run or rent out housing for homeless people (Knutagård et al. 2020). In many municipalities, there are also different groups and organizations that on a voluntary basis help homeless people.

A large part of the municipalities has built up a secondary housing market (Sahlin 1996) to provide housing for homeless people. The secondary housing market refers to housing where the homeless people receive time-limited subleases with special stipulations, which means that they do not have the same rights as tenants in the ordinary housing market (Sahlin, 1996; Knutagård et al. 2020). Today, the secondary housing market in Sweden comprises 26,100 housing units. Often, housing in the secondary housing market is based on the Housing staircase model and, as I mentioned earlier, the people who are subject of this type of efforts tend to get stuck there (Sahlin, 1996; Knutagård, 2009). Over the years, several studies have shown that the Housing staircase model and the secondary housing market work poorly to counteract homelessness (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2012).

In recent decades, many initiatives have been taken in Sweden to develop better methods for counteracting homelessness, for example, the National Board of Health and Welfare gave over 10 million Euro (€) in support of municipal development projects during the years 2002 to 2009 (Kristiansen 2013). Out of these projects, only a few have contributed to create better conditions for homeless people to be able to enter the ordinary housing mar-

ket (Knutagård, 2009; Denvall et al. 2011). An important reason for this is probably that most of the development projects were based on the Housing staircase model (Kristiansen 2013).

The implementation of Housing First in Sweden

Housing First began to be mentioned in the Swedish homelessness discussion about twenty years ago, but it was not until the fall 2009 when Lund University arranged a national conference on homelessness where Housing First was launched as an alternative to the Housing staircase model, that Housing First received wider attention. The conference got a lot of attention and many municipalities showed interest in starting up Housing First program. Two municipalities, Stockholm and Helsingborg, started pilot projects with Housing First as early as 2010. But in several of the municipalities that initially showed interest in starting Housing First programs, it proved difficult to realize the ideas.

After only a few years, it was clear that the implementation faced problems. In 2013, there were Housing First programs in 7 of Sweden's 290 municipalities, but none of these municipalities had Housing First as main strategy for counteracting homelessness, but it was a question of smaller projects that existed next to activities based on the Housing staircase model (Knutagård & Kristiansen 2013). Today, there is Housing First program in 21 municipalities in Sweden. In total, they comprise 600 apartments (Knutagård et al. 2020). This means that the secondary housing market is more than 40 times larger than the Housing First sector.

Path dependence (Pierson 2000) is a theoretical concept that can help us understand the seemingly strange situations where municipalities, who are

responsible for social work with the people experiencing homelessness in Sweden, continue with a policy that is based on a strategy that works poorly and is also very costly, despite the fact that there is a policy with an approach that gives significantly good results and which also is cost effective. Pierson (2000) describes path dependency as a dynamic social process. Central to his theory is the concept of increasing returns, which he describes as follows:

This conception of path dependence, in which preceding steps in a particular direction induce further movement in the same direction, is well captured by the idea of increasing returns. In an increasing returns process, the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path. This is because the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time. (Pierson 2000, page 252)

There are four features that generate increasing returns: large set-up or fixed costs, learning effects, coordination effects and adaptive expectations (Pierson 2000: 254). “Large set-up or fixed costs” gives individuals and organizations strong incentive to stick to one alternative. “Learning effects” arise when knowledge obtained in a certain system provides returns through continued use. “Coordination effects” occur when the benefits an individual receives by performing an activity increase when he or she chooses the same alternative as others. “Adaptive expectations” are about that individuals tends to choose alternatives that they expect will present minor disadvantages in the future.

An example of how large establishment or fixed costs (Pierson 2000) strengthen the path dependence in the organization of social work with the homeless in Sweden is that municipalities, non-profit organizations and pri-

vate companies have made large financial investments to build up homelessness services with shelters and other forms of temporary accommodations. Although these activities are economically costly and prevent homeless people from entering the regular housing market, they work to the extent that they provide shelter for homeless people and also provide many social workers and other white-collar workers with work, which can be seen as an example on how learning effects contribute to path dependence (Pierson 2000). An example of coordination effects (Pierson 2000) is that social workers and politicians who were interested in starting Housing First programs in several municipalities gave up these ideas and continued to work with the Housing staircase model when they met resistance from other social workers and politicians who wanted to keep the Housing staircase model, but also from landlords who did not want to provide apartments for Housing First. Adaptive expectations (Pierson 2000) were illustrated in a study of Housing First in Sweden where about 25 social workers and politicians were interviewed about what they thought about Housing First. Everyone was positive about Housing First, but almost everyone thought that other types of homelessness activities were also needed. One of the interviewed social workers showed his adaptive expectations when he said: “Housing First is good, but there will always be people who cannot manage their own housing ...” (Kristiansen 2013, page 22).

There is an important aspect in the path dependency of the Swedish social work with homeless people, which is difficult to analyze with Pierson’s theory, namely morality and more specifically the moral ideas that are of great importance for how the dominant view of homeless people in Sweden is socially constructed. Considering social problems as social constructions can

give an in-depth understanding of why social problems can be viewed in different ways in different cultures and at different times, but also why they can be so complicated to change. Ayukawa (2019) points to the core of the social constructivist perspective when he writes the following:

Not considering a social problem as a given condition is the most crucial characteristic of this perspective. It sees social problems as activities of individuals or groups which claim some imputed condition as a social problem. This perspective focuses on how some phenomena are constructed and defined as social problems. (Ayukawa 2019, page 1-2)

The social construction of homelessness and the people who suffer from homelessness takes place through interaction between different actors in the field of homelessness, and is influenced by norms, values and traditions that dominate in society. Blumer (1971) describes this as a process of collective definition. Although the social constructivist perspective is a theoretical model for explaining societal phenomena, it is important to remember that social constructions are of great importance for how we view and choose to treat, for example, homeless people. This is the meaning in the so-called Thomas theorem: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” (Thomas & Thomas 1928, p. 572).

The responsibilisation (Rose 1999; Miller & Rose 2008; Sahlin 2020) that has taken place in Sweden and many other countries since the 1980s has transferred responsibility for various social functions from the state and the municipalities to individuals, non-profit organizations and private companies. This is obvious when it comes to homelessness and social work with homeless people, which has also changed the social construction of homelessness from being primarily seen as a structural social problem to being considered

as a problem which is largely due to the weaknesses of the homeless people (Sahlin 1996).

In other words, the discussion about homelessness has been individualized and the image of the homeless is often linked to drug abuse, mental illness and irresponsibility. This is an important reason why social work with the homeless in Sweden is organized on the basis that homeless people must be treated with control and requirements in order for them to be able to manage their own housing, which is one of the main principles of the Housing staircase model. These moral aspects become important for the social construction of homelessness and homeless people and at the same time they are important for the explanation of the strong attachment to the Housing staircase model.

It may seem strange that the Housing staircase model, which obviously works poorly and contributes to housing problems, can survive, despite the fact that there is a method that works and generates good results. But the theory of path dependence shows that people have their reasons for maintaining and remaining in dysfunctional systems, not least when this is supported by moralism, to which the social constructivist perspective contributes with understanding.

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Homelessness is a growing global problem. Homelessness produces and reinforces social exclusion. The main reason for homelessness is that there is a shortage of housing available to people with low incomes. Counteracting homelessness requires housing policy initiatives that make it possible for people with low incomes to have access to housing. At the same time people who are homeless must receive help and social support. The Housing First model for housing has received much attention in discussions about how to combat homelessness because it is a successful method. Housing First differs significantly from traditional social work with homeless people, which often is based on the Housing staircase model which lacks evidence. The purpose of this article is to give an overview of homelessness and social work with homeless people in Sweden, and to describe and discuss the implementation of Housing First in Sweden which has been more problematic than in many other countries. The discussion about the implementation of Housing First is based on theory on path dependence and social constructivist theory.