

## ABSTRACT

Title: The Politics of Homelessness – Local Policy and Practice.

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Changes in housing policy in Sweden during the 1990's resulted in a transfer of responsibility, from the central state and the municipal housing companies to the local social authorities. The *purpose* of the thesis is to analyse local homelessness policies in two Swedish municipalities around this period, focusing on the way the problem of homelessness is handled and related to other problem constructions. Possible consequences of this for the housing situation and the personal relationships of people lacking housing are explored.

*Local homelessness policy* comprises of official decisions, goal documents and informal principles that local actors refer to or can be derived from their practice, local rule systems, the organization of special housing units for homeless clients, and local social work procedures. *The politics of homelessness* is a wider concept that comprises local homelessness policy, the wider housing policy and social policy context, definitions of homelessness (and their underlying assumptions), and the actions and resistance of the homeless.

A social constructivist approach to social problems is used, and the theory of the natural history of social problems is related to actual power struggles among local actors. The conceptual link between this approach and that of people-processing in local social work practices – conceptualised as *local social problems work* – is explored and institutional discourses are delimited. Analytical bracketing makes it possible to study discourse *and* (institutional and material) contexts.

The empirical material of the thesis consists of political documents, notes from observations and 57 interviews with institutional actors and homeless people.

During a period of fourteen years the special-housing-sphere in the two municipalities more than redoubled. Activities within this sphere rest upon the idea of continuous progression by way of constant (possible) surveillance and discipline. The contextually defined category of "the most vulnerable" is prioritised. However, mechanisms of exclusion continuously produce "residual groups".

In human service organizations assistance-seeking citizens become (homeless) clients – a prerequisite for access to special housing. Talk and interaction in this context bear the stamp of two institutional discourses: the local social authority discourse on deviance and the discourse on addiction emanating from the Alcoholics Anonymous movement. Further, local practices are organized by two discursive categories: "family" and "single". Homelessness, gender and parenthood are constructed at the intersection of two incompatible discourses on men: the discourse on "the equal father" and "the violent man". Housing pathways are analysed in part as outcomes of specific institutional discourses that permeate local policy and practice. Discursive categories in local homelessness policy are analysed, and absent but *possible* policy ideals are presented and discussed. Finally, catalysts for change in the system on a larger scale, and resistance by homeless clients, are analysed.

Keywords: Homelessness policy, homeless clients, social work, local practice, institutional discourse, discursive categories, gender, family, resistance, housing pathway.