



Displacement: Structural Evictions and Alienation

Emil Pull

Department of Urban Studies
Malmö University
Department of People and Technology
Roskilde University
emil.pull@mau.se

Abstract

Despite decreases in formal evictions in Sweden, housing precarity measured through homelessness as well as through various forms of displacement is increasing. It is therefore important to conceptualize beyond evictions when looking to the condition of various housing regimes. Forced relocation following renovations (renoviction) is a dominant form of displacement in Sweden today, and this form of displacement makes little difference compared to formal evictions, in terms of outcomes for both landlords and tenants. Drawing inspiration from displacement literature, I suggest conceptualizing all forms of ‘mundane displacement’ that lead to forced relocation as ‘structural evictions’. By mundane displacement I mean displacement processes instigated from within an already established political and legal framework, by actors in the realm of housing, that result in for instance increased costs of living for households to the extent that they are forced to leave their homes. I will use the example of renoviction to show how the boundary between formal evictions and structural evictions through renoviction are blurry at best. In this paper the similarities between formal evictions and displacement through



renoviction will be illustrated through narratives by tenants relocated within two neighborhoods in Uppsala, Sweden, that are undergoing renovations.

Keywords

Displacement; evictions; structural evictions; housing; dispossession

Introduction

Evictions are often at the center of attention in contemporary studies on urban displacement. In particular outside of the realm of case studies on gentrification (where displacement is identified through longitudinal shifts in socio-economic patterns or inferred through other variables than formal evictions). And rightfully so, evictions are increasing in prevalence around the world, recently exemplified by the housing crisis in Spain that led to over 250000 evictions in the year 2013 alone (Parreño Castellano, Domínguez Mujica, Armengol Martín, Boldú Hernández, & Pérez García, 2019), and the foreclosure crisis in the US that sent economic shockwaves beyond the borders of the US. The severity for the individual is well documented. Studies have linked evictions to economic as well as psychological distress (Robles-Ortega et al., 2017) and even increased suicide rates (Rojas & Stenberg, 2016). But while Sweden is arguably undergoing its worst housing crisis since the early 1990s, eviction numbers are at an all-time low. This is occurring despite a medial and cross-ideological party consensus that Sweden is currently undergoing an acute housing crisis. In fact, Sweden has mostly been spared large-scale eviction periods in the post-war era. From around 2000 evictions annually in the 1970s, and with a peak in the early and mid 1990s with 7615 evictions in 1994, evictions had dwindled to 2154 nationwide by 2018 (Bailiff authorities 2018). By comparison to many other countries, Sweden has, and has had, very low eviction rates. But while evictions are declining, homelessness on the other hand is increasing. In 2017 the Ministry of social services reported that roughly 34000 persons in Sweden were homeless, a 6% increase from the previous report 2011 when 32000 persons were reported homeless. In the segment of acutely homeless (persons referred by authorities to highly temporary situations like motels and shelters, and people sleeping rough outdoors and in public spaces) the increase was a staggering 30% during the same time period, from 4500 in 2011 to 5935 persons in 2017 (National Board of Health and Welfare 2017). Surveys on nationwide homelessness in Sweden are infrequent, and with a range of methodological issues¹

¹ Data collection on homelessness is notoriously difficult and involves a number of both methodological and empirical considerations. The data points presented here are the result of government surveys conducted by the ministry of social services through statistics from municipal social services. The definition of homelessness has changed and the numbers are not perfectly comparable. Changes in homelessness definitions, added categories of homelessness and varying

making longitudinal studies on homelessness difficult, but homelessness seems by all accounts to be increasing since at least the 1990s (see table 1).

In this short intervention I will argue for three things. Firstly, that formal eviction rates are a blunt instrument in gauging the condition of a housing regime, and that Sweden is a good example of this through the inversed correlation between evictions and homelessness. Secondly, that there is merely a procedural difference between normal evictions and renoeviction and other types of displacement. I will do this by drawing on narratives of displacement pressures in a renoeviction neighborhood in Uppsala, Sweden. Finally, I suggest the term *structural evictions* to encompass all instances of forced relocation that operates within the legal and political framework of the housing sector.

The Link Between Homelessness and Evictions

Previous research (Stenberg, 1990) has shown that eviction rates are strongly linked to ease of entry to the housing market in Sweden. During the 1970s, after the largest post-war construction boom, and at the peak of social democratic welfare Sweden, new groups who had previously been denied entry, entered the housing system and got permanent residence in the newly built high-quality housing stock. These new groups of so called ‘outsiders’ had previously been denied entry over a range of reasons like income levels and what social services at the time called ‘anti-social’ behavior (a problematic term that could encompass everything from loitering, petty crime, substance abuse and psychiatric diagnoses, to historically contingent norm breaking behavior). With the entry of less economically robust populations, evictions increased (most often over unpaid rents). Stenberg’s research show that tolerance levels on the part of landlords decreased over this period as well, so minor infractions and mildly late rent payments increasingly led to eviction notices in the 1970s. Paradoxically then, when the thresholds for entry was lowered and homelessness decreased, evictions increased.

Low and decreasing rates of evictions are consequently an inadequate measurement of how well the housing regime functions in providing housing for disenfranchised groups, and could even be an indicator of a closed regime with high levels of entry shutting certain vulnerable groups out altogether. While eviction levels are estimated to have been rather stagnant through the 1960s (Stenberg 1990), the 1970s and early 1980s saw a dramatic increase in both eviction notices and actual evictions (see table 1). Stenberg, who wrote an in-depth study on the evictions throughout the 1900s, links this spike in evictions with the competition of the state

response frequency from municipal actors prevent unambiguous comparison. Two important methodological points that the survey authors make are that: a) homelessness between 1993 and 1999 is probably stagnant, and the decrease is due to methodological differences b) several new categories introduced in 2005 would make the increase between 2005 and 2011 less dramatic, as the 2011 survey includes a wider range of situations of homelessness. Homelessness has, however, increased over all comparable subsets between those years, so the trend shown is correct.

subsidized housing construction program that ran from 1965-1974 and added roughly a million new dwellings of high quality to the Swedish housing stock, explicitly aimed towards spacious, high quality housing for everyone. The program essentially built away the previous housing shortage, and this period of high supply and strong welfare ambitions opened up the regular housing sector to households that had previously been restricted to the secondary sector (social housing contracts and institutions) or various forms of homelessness. As thresholds of entry diminished, the eviction prevalence increased in tandem. Stenberg found that the causes were plural, that low incomes and inability to pay the rent were the strongest contributing factors, but also that the evicted to a larger degree than others suffered from social problems such as substance abuse and mental illness. These populations had previously been denied access to the regular housing market, but as social security measures and the Swedish welfare apparatus expanded and focused explicitly on housing-first, these groups became increasingly integrated into the housing market. As the housing surplus turned to a housing shortage, these households were once again excluded from the regular market. The stagnation and decline in evictions towards the end of the 1980s can be attributed to a re-exclusion process of the housing regime (Stenberg, 1990).

As shown in table 1, the eviction rate had another spike in the mid 1990s. While some authors point to the economic recession of the 1990s pressuring households as a likely explanation, Runquist (2002) notes that the sharp increase coincides with a growing public discourse on ‘disturbing and noisy’ neighbors and neighborhoods, and a consequential law change in 1993 ushered in by municipal public housing companies making it far easier to evict tenants over nuisance complaints. Since the early 1990s, housing production in Sweden has been low, homelessness has increased, housing precarity has taken on new forms and illegal trading with housing contracts has increased. Meanwhile, displacement through renoviction has become increasingly prevalent in many cities in Sweden.

Despite falling eviction numbers, there has been a recent surge of attention in academia and media on increasing and increasingly violent forms of displacement (Baeten, Westin, Pull, & Molina, 2017; Polanska & Richard, n.d.; Pull & Richard, 2019) and inaccessibility to the regular housing sector for disenfranchised groups.

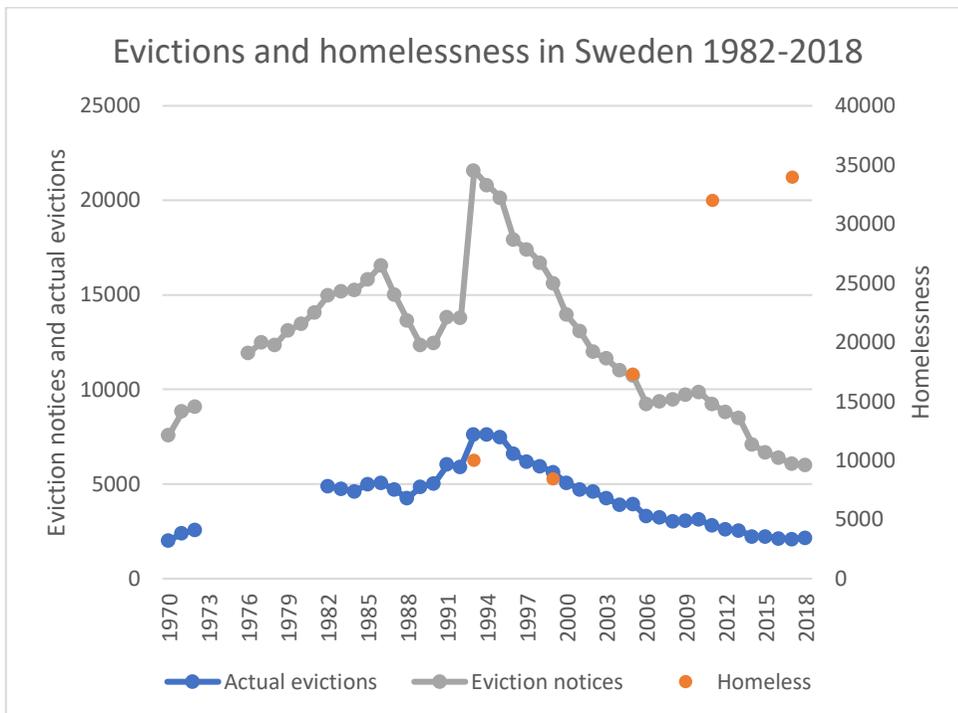


Table 1: Data on evictions gathered from the Bailiff authorities and Stenberg (1990). Numbers on homelessness from the National Board of Health and Welfare. It should be noted that eviction statistics does not include termination of various forms of special contracts, or where tenants have agreed to move before the state execution authorities get involved. Further, homeless numbers are based on municipal statistics and only include cases where social services have been involved. Number do not include homeless EU migrants for instance.

Renoviction in Sweden as a Form of Structural Eviction

The mechanism of monetizing rent gaps and extracting increased rents from tenants in Sweden is hardly done through formal evictions. Instead, as shown in previous studies on displacement in Sweden (see Baeten et al., 2017; Pull & Richard, 2019; Westin, 2011), the main way of closing rent gaps today is through *renoviction*: renovations with accompanied rent increases that displace people without formal evictions. While accounting for these mechanisms and practices in-depth is beyond the scope of this article, I will briefly outline four types of practices in brief (see Baeten et al., 2017; Polanska & Richard, 2019.; Pull, 2016; Pull & Richard, 2019 for a fuller account). Firstly, the economic pressure of increased rents is often extended in time (through a long process, in some cases decade long, from the announcement of renovations until the completion of the process with increased rents on the pay-slip), giving tenants time to move before the full economic brunt hits them. Secondly, many companies offer downsizing within the neighborhood “forcing” relocation without formal eviction. Thirdly, there have been ample reports of nefarious and

even threatening practices by landlords where tenants have simply felt compelled to move elsewhere rather than attempt to stay put in their apartments. Fourth, practices of short-term demolition contracts are widespread, preventing the mechanism of formal eviction to kick in by making the contracts precarious from the onset.

I have argued elsewhere (Pull 2016; Baeten et al, 2017; Pull & Richard, 2019) that the above mechanics have resulted in forceful displacements that are both violent to tenants, and structural in their nature (in that landlords operate within legal systems and practices). Here I argue that, for the purpose of both tenants (in losing their home) and real estate actors (in replacing low yield tenants with high yield tenants), the distinction between formal evictions and less formal displacement processes is for all intents and purposes insignificant beyond the procedural and technical operations of carrying them out. Instead, answering Marcuse's (2009) call to expose-propose-politicize, I suggest the novel concept of *structural evictions* to capture both formal evictions and other types of residential displacement that create new forms of ontological insecurities among large swaths of the population. By contrast to structural evictions, structural homelessness is a concept used by researchers and by the Swedish state. It is a statistical category that usually denotes homelessness caused by factors such as "trends in unemployment and poverty, the housing market, the structure of the economy generally, and large-scale social policies while individual causes include mental illness, alcoholism, substance abuse, and lack of a work ethic" (Main, 1998, 41). Conceptually, and in contrast to structural homelessness, the term structural evictions encompasses displacement processes caused by the very same factors: trends in unemployment and poverty, the housing market, the structure of the economy generally, and large-scale social policies that forces people to leave their home, including but not excluded to formal evictions. Structural evictions are displacement processes instigated from within an already established political and legal framework, by actors in the realm of housing (understood in a broad sense to encompass state, regional, municipal and private actors such as planning offices and both private and public landlords), that result in, for instance, increased costs of living for households to the extent that they are forced to leave their homes.

Structural evictions, and consequently displacement, have structural causes. Their ebb and flow is a dialectical process that can be explained on the basis of structural changes, all of which can be traced to the commodification of housing and residential alienation. Madden and Marcuse says of alienation that it:

[...] means estrangement, objectification, or othering. The idea is rarely applied to housing, but it should be. Intuitively alienation belongs within the field of housing, almost uniquely. Its roots can be found in property law. If something is "alienable," it is exchangeable. It can be bought and sold. (2016, 56)

For the homeowner commodification has an alienable effect when housing increasingly takes the form of exchange value, eating away at the use value of home

and security in a volatile world. For the tenant who does not benefit from potential increases in exchange value, the alienation is felt all the more strongly. Increasingly, housing appears as a commodity rather than as a home for tenants, just not *their* commodity. The production and reproduction of housing alienates tenants from their home in the same way as the commodity is alienated from the worker under a capitalist mode of production. Home is not produced and reproduced for the sake of and to the use value of a home, but as something alien to tenants. Instead of home serving as a site for ontological security and creativity, and its reproduction (making home) being a vital part of the human condition (Heidegger, 1971), commodified housing appears as something threatening – something controlled by hostile outside forces – something alien (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). The stories told by tenants from neighborhoods experiencing displacement pressures and structural evictions paint a stark picture of living in the extended and drawn out process of being structurally evicted²:

It doesn't feel like my home anymore. I don't live my life. All my art and paintings are sitting on the floor and leaning against the walls. I don't dare nail them up, perhaps the landlord will fine me if I move out and there are holes in the wall. A lot of [former] neighbors are talking about big fines when they move out. And I can't use my water-boiler anymore, the steam makes the new kitchen cabinets all bubbly and water damaged. Our old kitchens were high quality, these are the cheapest possible. (Tenant in Kvarngärdet, 2017)

Insecurity is one of the main effects of alienation, echoed by tenants in the Uppsala neighborhood:

We can choose color on wallpapers and such. And whether we want a coat hanger in the hallway or a towel warmer in the bathroom. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if I can't even afford to buy cigarettes or food to my dog after the rent has been paid. (Tenant, in Kvarngärdet, 2016)

Madden and Marcuse argue that “[c]ommodified dwelling space is not an expression of the residential needs of those who live in it [...] [i]n these conditions, households cannot shape their domestic environment as they wish. They do not find expression and satisfaction in their housing [...] Instead, their housing is the instrument of someone else's profit, and this confirms their lack of social power” (2016, 59). This lack of social power can take on an ontological rupture, where even the humanity of tenants is put to the test. As explained by a tenant in Gränby interviewed in 2015, “they don't treat us as humans. Or perhaps as humans but as

² All quotes come from tenants in Uppsala, Sweden. They have all experienced rent increases following renovations and they were all relocated to smaller apartments within the same neighborhood because they could not afford the new rents. In all instances the rents in their new apartments supersede their previous rents despite the decrease in living space.

costumers. Only we have no money. Before this was my home, but now it is their house and I live there as an inconvenience”.

The structural core of the pressures for these tenants is undeniable and chillingly obvious in that individual choice is not a component in their search for an exit:

I want to move. I would if I could. But if I move the same thing will just happen again. All of Uppsala is too expensive or will become when renovations reach new places. Me and people like me have no place in Uppsala today (Tenant in Kvarngärdet, 2017)

One important difference between formal evictions and structural evictions, as I define it here, is that formal evictions involve more actors than just the tenant and the landlord. At various stages a formal eviction process can include the tenant, the landlord, the rent tribunal (where the tenant may be legally represented by the tenant union), municipal social services and the state agency enforcing the eviction. In each of the steps and depending on the circumstances and grounds for eviction the tenant has a wide range of corrective measures and appeals at their disposal that might prevent the final eviction. When forces outside the household, like in the case of renoviction, make it impossible to remain at one's home – these options are rarely available or, as in the case of appeals to the Rent Tribunal, only very rarely favor the tenants. In sum, while evictions might be the penultimate outcome of housing alienation, failing to recognize subtler processes that displace people, such as renoviction, constitutes a failure to place ontological security as a non-negotiable precondition to any housing program.

Conclusion

In this intervention I have shown how there has been an inverted correlation between homelessness and formal evictions at several stages in postwar Sweden, or put differently: eviction rates have gone down while homelessness has increased. The periods of decreasing eviction rates have been correlated to increases in other forms of displacement processes, such as exclusionary displacement where the thresholds of entering the housing market have increased, and renoviction processes where the displacement of tenants is voluntary in the sense that no formal eviction is taking place. I have argued, however, that for all intents and purposes these ‘voluntary’ displacement processes are neither voluntary (but forced upon households by forces outside of the household, with no fault of their own), nor are they a gentler form of displacement than formal evictions. On the contrary, displacements occurring under processes such as renoviction alienate and cause suffering just as formal evictions do – and in many cases the process offers less protections and avenues of resistance and feelings of control for the tenant than formal evictions do. To capture these covert displacement processes, I have suggested the use of the concept ‘structural evictions’. Structural evictions encompass formal evictions, but also such displacement processes that through other avenues and operations within the political and economic framework forces tenants

to leave their home. While there undoubtedly will be both a methodological and theoretical challenge to measure structural evictions, researchers ought to take this task seriously. The demographic of displaced persons is mostly invisible in official statistics and research alike, and to rectify that (even only conceptually) is a way of politicizing the question of displacement. Tying displacement to eviction through the concept of structural evictions is also an act of recognition of both a societal problem and the severity of suffering experienced by those who thus far haven't been counted.

References

- Baeten, Guy, Westin, Sara, Pull, Emil and Molina, Irene. 2017. Pressure and violence: Housing renovation and displacement in Sweden. *Environment and Planning A*, 49(3), 631–651.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1971. *Poetry, language, thought*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Madden, David and Marcuse, Peter. 2016. *In defense of housing*. London: Verso.
- Main, Thomas. J. 1998. How to Think About Homelessness: Balancing Structural and Individual Causes. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 7(1), 41–54.
- Marcuse, Peter. 2009. From critical urban theory to the right to the city. *City*, 13(2–3), 185–197.
- Parreño Castellano, Jaun. M, Domínguez Mujica, Josefina, Armengol Martín, Matilde. T, Boldú Hernández, Jordi and Pérez García, Tanausú. 2019. Real estate dispossession and evictions in Spain: a theoretical geographical approach. *Boletín de La Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles*, 80(2602), 1-25.
- Polanska, Dominika V and Richard, Åse. 2019. Narratives of Fractured Trust in the Swedish Model: Tenants Emotions of Renovation, *Culture Unbound* 11(1), 141–164.
- Pull, Emil. 2016. “Renoviction and Displacement Violence. The new Neoliberalisation Frontier of the Swedish Housing Regime”, Paper presented at the Contested Cities, Congreso International conference, Madrid, July.
- Pull, Emil and Richard, Åse. 2019. Domicide: displacement and dispossessions in Uppsala, Sweden. *Social and Cultural Geography*, Online first <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1601245>.
- Robles-Ortega, Humbelina, Guerra, Pedro, González-Usera, Isis, Mata-Martín, José, L, Fernández-Santaella, M, Carmen, Vila, Jaime, Bolívar-Muñoz, Julia, Bernal-Solano, Mariola, Mateo-Rodríguez, Inmaculada and Daponte-Codina, Antonio. 2017. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptomatology in People affected by Home Eviction in Spain. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 20 (57), 1-8.
- Rojas, Yerko and Stenberg, Sten-Åke. 2016. Evictions and suicide: A follow-up study of almost 22 000 Swedish households in the wake of the global financial crisis. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 70(4), 409–413.

- Runquist, Wedding. 2002. Uppföljning av hemlösa som fått träningslägenheter i Västerås 1998. In, Ingrid Sahlin and Sirkka-Liisa Kärkkäinen, (Eds.), *Bostadslöshet som problem och politik: Aktuell nordisk forskning*. Köpenhamn: Temanord, pp. 113-137.
- Stenberg, Sten-Åke. 1990. *Vräkt ur folkhemmet: en studie av vräkningarna i Sverige under 1900-talet*. Stockholm: Carlsson.
- Westin, Sara. 2011. '... men vart ska ni då ta vägen?': Ombyggnation ur hyresgästernas perspektiv. *Arbetsrapport - Institutet för bostads- och urbanforskning, Uppsala universitet*. Gävle: Uppsala University publications.