Differential housing inclusion for newly arrived refugees in a Swedish context

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Abstract
In depictions of the Swedish welfare regime, there is a belief concerning the existence of a strong link between the universalism of rights and residency. But with tougher migration laws, temporary and time-limited residence permits, the settlement of different groups and access to housing and other social rights have been made more difficult. Public housing is often used as a means of providing housing for refugees, where time-limited subletting contracts are frequently used, writing off tenants' rights to possession. While there is a strong tradition of universal public rental housing without means testing in the Swedish housing supply, the institutional practices of housing provision for refugees deviate from universal features. In this paper, we examine the outcome of housing provision for refugees in one municipal setting. Our study is based on qualitative interviews with 19 officials and politicians about arguments and justifications concerning the housing practices in use. The analysis also includes interviews with 11 refugees with varying immigration status, focusing on their experiences of housing solutions and tenant rights. Our results show that the municipal responsibility to provide housing for refugees reciprocates immigration control, which produces not only variation in fulfilment of decent housing, but also differential inclusion based on a locally practised categorization of housing rights.

Keywords
housing provision, refugees, Sweden, universalism, differential inclusion

Sammendrag
I skildringer av den svenska välfärdsstaten beskrivs ofta en stark koppling mellan principer om universella rättigheter och uppehållstillstånd. Men i och med skärpta migrationslagar med bland annat tillfälliga och tidsbegränsade uppehållstillstånd, försvåras olika gruppers bosättning och andra sociala rättigheter. De kommunala allmännyttiga bostadsföretagen används ofta som sätt att möta bostadsförsörjningsansvaret för nyanlända flyktingar, då med tidsbegränsade andrahandskontrakt utan besittningsrätt. Så samtidigt som det finns en stark tradition av allmännyttiga hyresbostäder utan behovsprövning i svensk bostadsförsörjning, avvikar den institutionella praxisen för bostadsförsörjning till nyanlända från universella drag. I den här artikeln undersöker vi resultatet av bostadsförsörjningen för flyktingar i en kommun. Vår studie bygger på kvalitativa intervjuer av tjänstemän och politiker om argument för och motiveringar av den boendepraxis som används (totalt 30 intervjuer). I analysen ingår även intervjuer med 11 flyktingar med varierande flyktingstatus om deras erfarenheter av boendelösningar och hyresgästrättigheter. Vårt resultat visar att det kommunala ansvaret att tillhandahålla bostäder till flyktingar blir den del av migrationskontrollen, vilket inte bara ger en variation av uppfyllandet av anstądiga bostäder, utan också en differentiell inkludering baserad på en lokalt praktiserad kategorisering av bostadsrättigheter.

Nøkkelord
boligforsyning, flyktninger, Sverige, differensiert inkludering
Introduction

Sustainable housing solutions are vital for successful refugee integration and are often viewed as a prerequisite for social, economic, and cultural integration. Thus, a housing situation that provides a sense of predictability is crucial for individual wellbeing and a means and marker of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). On the other hand, inadequate housing adds to the already stressful experiences of long waiting times for residence permits and impedes advancement in education, personal economy, employment, reunification with family members and hinders social inclusion (Mangrio et al., 2020). Public attention around the Swedish reception of refugees no longer only revolves around controlling the flows of asylum-seekers, but also concerns how to provide housing for those granted protection (Holmqvist et al., 2022). Still, the political will and the capacity to provide housing for refugee migrants differ across regions as well as between rural and urban areas (Grange & Björling, 2020; Jansson-Keshavarz & Nordling, 2022). The Swedish welfare state regime is still associated with universalism of rights and a residence-based welfare system with few elements of selective means-tested programs, based on the idea of general welfare “for all” with few special, and potentially stigmatizing, arrangements for vulnerable groups (Rothstein, 1998; Sainsbury, 2012; Könönen, 2018). Also, the Swedish housing regime distinguishes itself by being centred around a universal housing policy aimed at all citizens without a stock of social housing directed to vulnerable groups, which would characterize a selective housing regime. However, the empirical validity of this universal approach is debatable, and it has been claimed that housing policy is going through a process of residualization, where needs-tested selective elements are increasingly applied (Salonen, 2015; Grander, 2019, 2021; Borg, 2019).

In Sweden, and elsewhere in Europe, the practice of immigration laws has enabled differentiation of temporary and time-limited residencies, producing a variety of non-citizenship positions that are neither inside nor outside (Baban, et al., 2017, p. 53). This entails a move away from the ‘rule of permanency’, with changes in reception practices towards more particularistic solutions for various groups of newly arrived individuals (Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018; Righard & Öberg, 2019; Sahlin, 2020). Several scholars have pointed out the arbitrariness in immigration policy as regards the difference between legal and illegal statuses, but it is often assumed that the Nordic welfare regimes offer the same social rights to legal residents (non-citizens) and citizens (Sainsbury, 2012). However, the increasing temporariness in migration laws and the fragile legal statuses with short-term permits affect citizenship rights to welfare goods and limit the possibility to have stable jobs and housing also in Sweden (Hellgren, 2016). The substantial rights to housing for residing non-citizens, like refugees, are even more indistinct due to the often-precarious conditions lacking in housing market resources, such as stable income, information on vacancies and the ability to navigate in the housing market (Borevi & Bengtsson, 2015; Hellgren, 2016).

1 In 2016, the government introduced a temporary law (SFS 2016:752), made permanent in July 2021. The granting of temporary prolongation of permits, as well as the granting of permanent permits, was made conditional on employment and income but also on housing. Moreover, rules were introduced that made reunification of family members possible only if the applicant was able to provide for the family members and had sufficient housing arrangements for the family members. The only refugee category exempted from the temporary permit was now for quota refugees. Convention refugees and asylum seekers with other reasons to seek protection, approved by the authorities, were only to be granted a temporary permit, often 13 months, which required application for prolongation, possibly up to three years. Prolongation of a temporary permit is based on quite a range of criteria, financial stability, and employment, where income from stable employment is the only eligible source, which, moreover, needs to be ‘stable’, not subsidized, employment.
Increasingly restrictive migration and asylum policies together with the increased marketization of housing and fragmentation of local housing policy practices make it even more difficult to maintain a universal housing model that enables housing inclusion for vulnerable groups, such as refugees. Hence, the present paper will examine housing provision for refugees in a municipal setting and discuss the outcome of the housing policy adopted, from the perspective of differential inclusion, selectivity, and universalism in the local housing regime.

Differentiated migration and housing rights

In 2015, during what came to be known as the 'refugee crisis', new legal obligations in the form of the Settlement Act (SFS 2016:38)\(^2\), concerning the reception for settlement of certain newly arrived refugees, were put in place. The Act required all Swedish municipalities to accept a predetermined number of individuals who had been granted residence permits. The Act was intended to lead to a more even geographical distribution of newly arrived refugees and to speed up their establishment in the country’s municipalities. This proved challenging for many municipalities, especially those with a shortage of affordable rental accommodation (Boverket, 2020). This, in turn, gave rise to a variety of solutions for providing housing in different municipalities and areas of Sweden (Boverket, 2020; Righard & Öberg, 2019; Sahlin 2020), creating differentiation among groups of refugees regarding housing related to, for instance, the length of the lease and the quality of accommodation provided. For example, refugees who actively choose a municipality to settle in basically need to make housing arrangements on their own and have no legitimate ‘right’ to claim municipal housing support. This has been shown to result in overcrowded living, especially in larger cities and areas where many newly arrived individuals have settled due to low rental costs or because others from their homeland or family members have already settled there and, thus, where there might be rooms to let (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022).

Despite knowledge about the importance of durable and adequate housing, and the conventions and treaties to which Sweden is a signatory, the statutory responsibility of municipalities to arrange housing for newly arrived refugees is limited to two years and reserved for a single category, those assigned to the municipality by the Swedish Migration Agency. In many municipalities, changes in urban planning, such as the privatization of municipal housing, renovictions and investments in megaprojects, have also conflicted with efforts to provide socially sustainable housing solutions for newly arrived migrants (Listerborn, 2018; 2021; Grange & Björling, 2020).

This has clearly had an impact on housing inclusion and on how local authorities have differed in their interpretation of the obligation to provide refugees with housing. Local variations in the responsibility taken to provide for refugees’ housing and the differentiation made in the acknowledgement of housing rights can be described as “the uneven geographies of refugee-accommodation” (Zill et al., 2020:491). Immigration controls play a prominent role in creating ‘institutionalized insecurity’ and mediating the position of non-citizen in a hierarchized order of relations (Anderson, 2010). The outcome of local authorities’ shifting recognition of citizen rights, often based on residency, also results in unequal housing inclusion.

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\(^2\) The Settlement Act made it mandatory for municipalities to arrange accommodation for a period of at least two years for those whose asylum application had been accepted. The law is unclear regarding what municipalities are expected to do about housing after two years, nor does it contain any provisions concerning the type or quality of housing to be provided (Sahlin 2020; Righard & Öberg 2019).
Theoretical points of departure
Because refugee experiences often involve migration processes that extend over time, involving life-threatening migration routes, financial risk-taking, suffering and loss, there is often an urgent need for stability, security, and a normalized everyday life once the residence permit has been granted. Housing can also be considered a material and social marker of recognition and belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008). Together with employment, education and health, access to housing is one of the most important benchmarks for the integration of new members of society (Ager & Strang, 2008). The Swedish housing regime distinguishes itself in its universalism, as there is a long-standing tradition of universal public rental housing with no income ceilings or other forms of means testing (cf. Grander, 2019). There is no stock of ‘social housing’ reserved for low-income groups or other groups in the margins of the welfare state. Hence, featuring a universal housing policy, the Swedish housing regime is aimed at all citizens without means or needs testing and intertwined in a system of public housing owned by public housing companies, directed toward all types of households, distributing vacancies through a queue system (Grander, 2021, p. 6). This entails public rental housing formally open to all sections of the population, where equal eligibility demands are placed on all potential tenants. In the past, public housing in Sweden was a central instrument in contributing to socially inclusive cities. However, the financialization of the housing market and changes in policy have gradually changed the landscape, where the affordable public housing stock is shrinking, thresholds for housing are becoming higher and more people are ending up in the margins of housing inclusion (Boverket, 2020). Although no formal needs testing exists in the public universal housing policy, a common municipal strategy is a system of secondary market rental contracts, where the social services often rent apartments from property owners, public housing companies included, and, in turn, sublet these apartments to individuals who have difficulties entering the regular housing market. What these kinds of ‘semi-selective’ measures entail for public housing is that the universal approach is gradually being replaced by an ambiguous model of universal discourse, but where the outcome is selective (Borg, 2019; Grander & Bengtsson, 2023). Grander suggests that a new public housing regime model is emerging in Sweden: a ‘New Public Housing’ with a shrinking stock of affordable public housing and higher thresholds for accessibility, making it harder for economically disadvantaged groups to gain access to housing (Grander, 2021, p. 7). However, the use of selective elements such as ‘social contracts’ is designated for vulnerable groups with individual problems, which prevents them from competing on the regular housing market, which in most municipalities does not apply to households with (only) a poor economy. A system of categorization of housing needs eligible for social contracts is practised in most Swedish municipalities, preceded by an assessment of the individuals’ housing needs, in which ‘structural reasons’ for homelessness or houselessness are distinguished from personal issues, such as mental illness or drug addiction, and often not considered valid reasons for support (Sahlin, 2020).

The process of tightening migration rules in Sweden brought with it a multitude of insecure protection statuses. These uncertain, time-limited or temporary permits prohibit categories of refugees from applying for full citizenship, placing restrictions on their access to paid employment and to housing (the housing market), thus preventing them from reuniting with family members; (cf. Baban et al., 2017). The fragmentation of migration rules has not only increased migrants’ vulnerability, but also contributed to the growth in ‘exclusionary practices’ that ‘situate migrants ambiguously as outside the national territory even when they physically are within’ (Coutin, 2010, p. 201). In the present article,
we use the analytical concept of differential inclusion. It is useful for framing and shedding light on the processes through which legal categorization of refugees’ rights (here housing rights) is carried out and how this categorization may coincide with refugees’ indistinct and insecure positions of immigration status. The concept of differential inclusion assumes that society is permeated by and made up of multiple border processes. Rather than being solely a “thing” like a wall, a fence or “geographical lines of separation between nation states”, borders should be understood through “multiple legal and discursive and non-discursive practices, which drive the processes of partition, filtering and hierarchization” (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012: 67). Mezzadra and Neilson (2012) draw on the insights made by Castles and Davidson 2020 concerning the “porous boundaries” that produce an increasing number of people who “are included, but don’t belong” (Castles and Davidson 2020). A crucial point made by Mezzadra and Neilson is that these kinds of subjectivities of non-belonging do not haphazardly appear but are strategically produced as such. As in many other nation-states, the Swedish asylum policy is already based on a logic of differential inclusion/exclusion, whereby migrants have stratified access to asylum and refugee procedures and corresponding welfare rights based on their legal statuses. They are continuously confronted with visible as well as invisible borders that position them within hierarchical structures (Anderson et al., 2012: 76). However, Mezzadra and Neilson’s conceptualization suggests that we should move beyond the binary idea of inclusion and exclusion, because new kinds of border controls, with different degrees of internality and externality, are replacing and blurring the clear-cut distinction between inside and outside that used to be produced by the traditional borders of the nation-state. Urban (local and regional) spaces become sites of bordering through various mechanisms that filter, control and contain migrants, such as residence status controls, encampments, access (or denial) to various services, stop-and-search programmes, and the like (see Fauser et al., 2019). While much of the previous research on the nexus of migration and social policy in the Swedish context has tended to focus on national-level policies, we need to pay attention to the development of indirect and everyday bordering practices at the municipal level (Grange & Björling, 2020; Jansson-Keshavarz & Nordling, 2022). We use the concept of differential inclusion to problematize/highlight the nexus of migration and housing policy as well as the growing importance of everyday policy practices in positioning migrants within a local welfare state context (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Differential inclusion – as a possible result of uncertainty, time-limited or temporary permits prohibiting full citizenship, and the restrictions it may entail for access to housing and other vital resources enabling long-term stability – becomes especially intriguing when we look at the Swedish welfare state’s universalism of rights (cf. Baban et al., 2017). Because universalism rests on the premise of inhabitants’ full and permanent citizenship, it may seem inappropriate to apply universal housing means to an increasingly fragmented target group with various and fragile residencies. For this reason, the concept of differential inclusion has the potential to elucidate the outcomes of policy practices in our case study.

**Methodology**

The empirical data for this project were gathered during the period 2018–2021. We have conducted a total of 19 interviews with politicians, municipal officials, and civil society actors.

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3 Formas 2018-00082 *A place for everyone? Sustainable housing and social integration among newly arrived refugees*.

4 The term civil society actors refer to those working locally for humanitarian organizations, community associations, study associations and “new” associations working on issues related to refugee reception and integration.
working on housing solutions for newly arrived refugees in one medium-size Swedish city in northern Sweden. We have also interviewed 11 newly arrived refugees\(^5\) concerning their housing situation since arriving in Sweden as well as the obstacles and challenges they have faced in finding a long-term housing solution. In our interviews, we came across a variety of residencies among our interviewees, although our initial criterion for sampling was newly arrived individuals with permission to stay who were not in the process of seeking asylum. The various residencies of the interviewees included in our data collection were quota refugees, convention refugees with permanent as well as temporary residency, and unaccompanied refugees with a time-limited amnesty, in accordance with the Upper Secondary School Act (SFS 2017:253). Moreover, within the group, there are also differences between refugees who were assigned to the municipality, for whom the municipalities were obliged to arrange housing, and self-settlers [In Sw. EBO], for whom the municipalities had no legal obligation to provide housing support (see Table 1).

The municipality in focus has a population of 130,000\(^6\), most of whom reside in the medium-size university town known for its liberal and progressive outlook on both political leadership and the general welfare of its citizens. The municipality has, in a national and international comparison, a large public housing stock and few homeless, even though the share of public housing is decreasing and the number of homeless is increasing. Like the rest of the country, the rate of building of additional new homes has been very low since the 1970s ([Municipality] 2017).

Even if the city is the largest in the region and has a comparably well-functioning welfare operation, it is struggling to compete in a global market and is viewed as peripheral in a national context (Eriksson, 2010). And despite the need for a population increase, the municipality has chosen to receive comparatively few refugees and unaccompanied minors. Even though it is by far the most prosperous municipality in the region, it has for many years received proportionally the fewest newly arrived refugees (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022).

### Table 1. Categories of refugees received in the municipality. Period 2015–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quota</th>
<th>Assigned</th>
<th>Self-settlers</th>
<th>Family reunite</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Received in total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sa: 2015–2020</strong></td>
<td><strong>277</strong></td>
<td><strong>966</strong></td>
<td><strong>312</strong></td>
<td><strong>481</strong></td>
<td><strong>67</strong></td>
<td><strong>2103</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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5 The selection of interviewees was limited to newly arrived refugees who had been granted a temporary or permanent residence permit (as quota refugees or with grounds for asylum). We excluded asylum seekers from interviews.

6 The city is pseudonymized in the article. This is because identification of the city in focus is not of analytical importance, rather the contextual understanding is. Therefore, naming the city would invite irrelevant attention to the particular city, instead of focussing on the context around planning and refugee reception that we intend to reveal.
Besides employing ethical protocols to protect the participants, and specific ethical considerations suggested by the Swedish ethical committee regarding the responsibility and accountability of researchers, our research project strives to maximize the benefits to individuals and society. This has meant that, in debates on planning and housing, we have endeavoured to make the often-marginalized narratives of refugees central and recognized.

We employed directed content analysis across the interviews and data types (Hsieh-Fang & Shannon, 2005). With a directed approach the analysis is deductive, hence our interviews are based on previous research and theories on differential inclusion informed by anti-racist and feminist ontologies.

The informant interviews involved questions about the informants’ work with integration and housing generally as well as ethical issues related to the various conditions for their work, the relationships between actors and authorities, and the different meanings of housing and integration. When these open questions were posed, the informants were encouraged to interpret the questions freely and to elaborate their answers as they wished. In this way, we also had the opportunity to ask more specific questions about the chosen codes and to talk about things that were important to them, something we had not anticipated. The interview transcripts were highlighted and coded in line with the predetermined codes (Hsieh-Fang & Shannon, 2005).

We start by addressing the local housing solutions for refugees in the municipality and how policymakers and officials relate this to discourses of migration and integration. We then move on to discuss the differentiation of housing from the perspective of both the policymakers and the refugees. Next, we continue to analyse the meanings of housing from the perspective of the refugees and the officials working with housing.

Results
In this section our primary focus is on housing policy solutions and the outcomes in relation to housing inclusion among newly arrived refugees with different protection statuses. We analyse the narratives of officials and policymakers to understand the local housing policy in a context of universalism, selectivity, and housing inclusion.

Arranging local housing solutions for refugees
The forms of accommodation provided to refugees assigned by the Swedish Migration Agency vary between and within all Swedish municipalities (Zill et al., 2020; Rigard & Öberg, 2019). The most common means of solving housing for refugees during the two-year period the municipalities must by law ensure housing has been through the social services, or the organization built up to receive refugees, entering into an agreement with a publicly owned housing provider to let a given percentage of its housing units. The municipality we studied employed a two-year secondary lease with the option to extend for a further two years after review, but still on the terms of a secondary contract with no possession of tenant rights. The hope was that by the end of the two-year temporary lease the

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7 The project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority 2019-06-18, Reg. no.: 2019-01688.
8 According to the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning’s (Boverket’s) 2019 housing market survey, 103 of Sweden’s 290 municipalities stated that they offered first-hand and permanent leases immediately or after a probationary period (Boverket 2020). This means that a clear majority of municipalities (187) offered only temporary secondary leases to newly arrived migrants.
refugees would have spent sufficient time in the housing queue to obtain a primary lease, either with a municipal or private landlord, or that they would be able to find a sublet in the municipality or elsewhere.

Even though the municipality has a relatively large amount of public housing, accounting for approximately 50% of its total housing stock, the average queue time for a primary lease is between eight and twelve years. Hence, the duration of the temporary contract did not enable a chance for a first-hand housing contract. In its strategy for providing housing for refugees, the municipal officials claimed they did not choose to apply a ‘social housing’ model by providing priority positions for refugees in the housing queue, or to apply a parallel stock of housing with a lower threshold for accessibility. Instead, the common narrative among policymakers and officials echoed the institutional practice for housing provision, which rests on universal principles of accessibility, competition, and quality of housing. In essence, the chosen strategy was narrated as resting on norms of equity and fairness (cf. Grander, 2017): same terms for all, and same stock of housing for all. One of the practices expected to guarantee universal ideals of equity and sameness was, for example, the queue system for housing:

Above all, the housing queue is the same for everyone and we don’t differentiate at all. [Social services staff] also offer guidance and brief them that they need to register in our housing queue at the earliest opportunity. And then, of course, they need to apply on the same grounds as anyone else in the housing queue. But then, as we know, the average queue time is dependent on, well it varies, but it’s eight years. (Source: senior official, municipal housing company.)

Despite the stated universal practice of a housing queue, granting temporary housing on a secondary lease is clearly a deviation from the practice of a housing queue based on universal premises. The assigned refugees are given priority to housing, although for a limited period and with no clear expectations or practices offered concerning whether and how the secondary contract could be converted to a first-hand contract by the end of the two years. Terms such as self-empowerment recurred in our interviews with officials and were used to support the position that newly arrived refugees should quickly make their own way in the housing market. These narratives about ‘fairness’ associated with administration of the public housing queue and expectations concerning refugees’ speedy integration into the economy are hardly in accord with the average waiting time of 8–12 years in the queue for a housing contract. Moreover, refugees’ disadvantageous position entails the lack of many of the resources necessary for such integration: a social network, a wage, or savings. Nevertheless, the senior officials insisted on the idea of universalism in the practice of registration and maintaining a housing queue, as well as the demands for economical soundness and income in assessment of eligibility for tenancy.

Absolutely – everyone is allowed to stay in the queue for public housing. It’s the date for registration that counts, and the same rules apply for all. We assess the credit rating of the applicant, today it’s minimum 140,000 SEK a year, and we check if there are any records for non-payment of debts, and we ask for a certificate of employment. If the applicant is unemployed, we assess if the income level from allowances covers the rental level. There are a great number of certificates we ask for, for proving solvency. If we end up with doubts about the capacity to pay, we might require that the applicant call in a guarantor who can assure rent payments for three years.
But of course, the refugee might lack the social network necessary to come up with guarantors. However, this is the routine we practice for all applicants. (Source: senior official, public housing company).

In the above excerpt, the officials suggest that the refugees are included in the local universal practice of public housing distribution. It is emphasized that refugees, like every other citizen, have the right to stand in the housing queue, and that they are assessed on the same financial terms as everyone else. Although the interviewees recognize the refugees’ disadvantageous outsider position in the municipal housing market, refugees are nevertheless not recognized and included as members of a vulnerable group who are entitled to or need the kind of selective measures that would lower the thresholds to housing at the time when the temporary contract is terminated. The argument is that their fragile position in the housing market is not generated by ‘social problems’ that impede their ability to compete for housing (see Table 2 for a description of the differences between social contracts and the housing model applied for refugees).

We don’t apply social contracts. There is no such thing for refugees. It is a regular secondary lease contract, and no selective measures and such. The vast majority of the newly arrived will get started and become integrated – just like you and me. Our [the municipality’s] policy is about empowerment and self-sufficiency, to look for housing, apply for housing and to be an independent signatory of a housing contract. That’s the idea. (Source: senior official, integration office).

Many officials and politicians justify the use of fixed-term secondary leases on the grounds that the municipality is obliged to observe the principle of equity. The insistence on reproducing the narrative of universalism may have obscured other alternative selective strategies, for example by first applying a ‘secondary social contract’ that later may be converted to a first-hand permanent contract without time limitations. But this alternative strategy would, according to the informants, risk crowding out other weak groups from the housing market, in principle pitting these groups against one another. The fear was also expressed that positive discrimination in favour of newly arrived migrants might have a negative effect on public opinion. The argument used in defence of universalism and a ‘no-special treatment rule’ was to preserve ‘equity’ in meeting the housing needs of citizens and, thus, to avoid so-called ‘displacement effects’ [undanträngningseffekter] – that is, to avoid the risk of pushing aside other inhabitants in need of housing for the benefit of refugees (Törnbloom & Kazemi, 2015).

Of course, we are far from happy with secondary leasing as a solution; it would clearly feel better to give people primary leases, but we need to demonstrate to the rest of the population that we do not pit groups against one another at the risk of creating a storm in the public opinion. We have not taken apartments from students; we have not granted any privileges; we have fulfilled our legal obligations. (Source: Politician/committee member).

Hence, it was emphasized that refugees’ obstacles to entering the housing market were not the same as those of individuals in vulnerable positions on the housing market, such as clients with personal problems. In the housing policy practice, categories of clientele were made up of groups that qualified for or were entitled to selective measures of housing support, while refugees were considered to belong to a group that qualified for universal housing policy practices, although with some adjustments (see Table 2).
Table 2. Selective elements in general Swedish housing policy, and the ‘semi-social housing’ elements in the case studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social contracts</th>
<th>Semi-social housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target groups</strong></td>
<td>A selective element within a 1960s framework of universalism. This selective element applies to groups with grave social problems: mentally ill, previously evicted, addicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public responsibility</strong></td>
<td>Municipalities are obligated to offer housing to citizens who have social problems and risk becoming homeless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing solution</strong></td>
<td>The social services rent out during a trial period; if successful, it becomes a permanent contract.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Categories of refugees and differential housing rights

Based on our analysis of the narratives of informants working with planning and housing provision, a common story was told about a state of ‘crisis’ when they were obliged to provide housing for a fixed number of assigned refugees (Wikström et al., 2023). The narratives of municipality representatives applied a locally anchored logic to their inclusion (and exclusion) of refugees for whom they determine the housing support. The most prominent logic was attribution of the statutory obligation (see also Sahlin, 2020). In arguments for housing support to various groups, a distinction was made between which of the groups fell inside versus outside the municipality’s legal responsibility. Below is an excerpt from the narrative of a senior official at the integration office where the categorization of housing rights is carried out. Here the distinction is between the assigned and self-settlers, even though they have the same residency by immigrant law and, therefore, equivalent welfare-state citizenship.

We [at the integration office] provide support to all newly arrived refugees. But when it comes to housing provision, this is exclusively restricted to those assigned to the municipality in accordance with the ‘settlement law’. It’s our obligation. For others, those [refugees] who turn up spontaneously, we can only refer them to the local property owners, tell them to sign up in the queue for municipal housing, and look for ads on the secondary market. Although we’re aware that there are pretty slim chances of finding housing that way. (source: senior official, integration office).

9 Social contracts can be granted to people who have particular difficulties in obtaining a contract themselves. Refugees are not included in the group eligible for a social contract.

10 The housing situation for refugees after those two years differs between municipalities. In the municipality we have studied, the refugees may get two more years, depending on the outcome of a municipal assessment. In some municipalities, refugees are offered permanent contracts; at the other extreme, some municipalities are directing refugees to housing in deprived municipalities with dubious landlords (Listerborn & Baeten 2022).

In international comparisons, Swedish public housing is sometimes classified as ‘social housing’. The function of the public utility in the housing market is like the function of the social housing sector in some other countries. However, importantly, public housing in Sweden does not cater to certain target groups (Listerborn 2018).

11 The reach of our data does not include information on how the assessments were made for whom and on what terms possible prolongation of a temporary secondary contract was made.
The institutional practice exemplified above represents a deviation from the universal principle of housing provision, introducing selectivity for a category of refugees who are in fact covered by the local obligation regarding housing provision (cf. Borg, 2019; Grander, 2017; Könönen, 2018). Inclusionary criteria assume corresponding criteria for exclusion. For instance, if a refugee who is entitled to residency declines the settlement that is offered, or objects to the suggested housing, the refugee is automatically excluded from the category of refugees entitled to housing support. In the words of Könönen (2018), this is an example of “internal immigration control functioning to filter and mediating the position of non-citizen in a hierarchised order of relations” (p. 56). There may be multiple reasons why the suggested housing is not suitable for the applicant – reasons the administrators do not consider in their assessment. A counsellor at the municipal adult education programme, Swedish for Immigrants (Sw. SFI), who had been approached by refugees without housing or in a situation where they were about to become homeless, had opinions about the inconsistency in applying much too rigid criteria for housing support.

I mean the reasons why an individual declines the suggested housing might be reasonable. I have contact with a woman, a single mother of two small children, she turned down the suggested housing because it was in a small locality five [Swedish] miles from the city centre. The time and the money it would require for her to first go by bus to the city, then to day-care and then to Swedish for Immigrants at the opposite side of town. She had the opportunity to temporarily stay with a relative and may have thought, ‘things will work out later’. But now, she is without housing and cannot live with her relative anymore and is being denied help from social services because she initially turned down the assigned housing. […] I think she lives in a camping cabin right now. She told me she was granted 600 SEK per day by social services, but the rent is 1200 per day – that’s 36 000 per month, housing costs only. I mean it doesn’t make sense. She was rejected for a second-hand contract in public housing, and the reason was ‘she didn’t meet the eligibility criteria’. I mean the social services are obliged to find her and her children a roof over their heads anyway. We can’t have children living in the street. It’s winter, come on! (Source: Counsellor at municipal adult education).

Changes in the terms and rules of residency for the group of unaccompanied minor refugees created uncertainties in local governance and, above all, effected the predictability and security of housing for individuals. In the spring of 2017, a law was passed that aimed to enable those who had been denied residency, but had not yet turned 18, to stay and study at the upper secondary school level. In 2019, the Migration Agency announced that those who had received a residence permit through the Upper Secondary School Act were no longer allowed to stay in the Migration Agency’s accommodations but must find housing.

12 On the grounds of distressing circumstances, a specific amnesty law (SFS 2017:253 Upper Secondary School Act) was introduced that allowed this group of young individuals to stay temporarily for 13 months to finish their upper secondary school education. Prolongation was possible based on certain school performance criteria. The premises of this amnesty in terms of social rights were minimized, such that they were not entitled to any kind of support from social services or the migration board, apart from keeping the study grant all upper secondary school students receive. They were not entitled to municipal housing support from the municipality. After they finished upper secondary school with full grades, it was possible for them to apply for prolongation of their permit or permanent residency, but only based on a stable employment contract within six months of finishing school. A continued education for an upper secondary school degree, academic studies, or vocational courses did not imply eligibility for residency.
of their own. At the same time, the right to a daily allowance from the Migration Agency ceased, and the young people who could not resolve their housing situation or livelihood were referred to the social services in the municipalities where they lived.

The newly arrived who came as unaccompanied minors to the municipality needed to hastily leave their accommodation arranged by the municipality at the age of 18 (previously the age was 20, but the law was changed in 2019). Approximately 75 young individuals in the municipality were without housing due to institutional changes. Parallel to this, the government changed the reimbursement system for certain categories of refugees (SOU 2018:35), and the municipalities had to pick up the bill. Facing this predicament, although well aware of the difficulties these young refugees faced in finding accommodation, the municipalities prioritized their statutory obligation to provide housing only to the refugees assigned to them.

A strategy employed to arrange temporary housing for the young homeless was a co-op arrangement between civil organizations and municipalities. The local Red Cross organization and another voluntary organisation received funding from the municipality to match stay-in housing with locals. For about two years, the municipality forwarded financial reimbursement from the state to the organizations to pay for one employee, who oversaw the matching unaccompanied minors with locals willing to let out a room. The locals received SEK 2000 per month. In terms of housing adequacy – stability, quality and proximity – the standard was set low. The focus was a temporary “roof over their heads” until they completed school.

Already from the beginning it was all about finishing school, this was one of the criteria set up – focus on their school performance. So, the housing arrangement from the outset was a matter of a ‘roof over their heads’ just to enable them to finish school. […] (Source: representative Red Cross)

The sudden changes in residency rules for unaccompanied refugees and the arbitrary treatment regarding their age and rights while granting temporary residency are clear examples of the ‘exclusionary practices’ that ‘situate migrants ambiguously as outside the national territory even when they physically are within’ (Coutin, 2010, p. 201). Moreover, this sudden differentiation of young refugees placed them in a liminal situation that reflected the state’s view on their deservingness regarding staying in Sweden.

Interviews with young refugees with temporary permits substantiate the provisional and emergency character of the housing provided (Wikström et al., 2023). Several of our interviewees had experienced four or five different temporary housing solutions, and the experiences of lodging with someone were varied and ambiguous. Their position, neither inside nor outside, and the interconnectedness of immigrant status and limited rights to housing and more are viable examples of differential inclusion (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013).
Discussion and conclusion

The results of our study provide an example of a municipality’s resolute and firm policy direction – which is not to deviate from a universal model when providing housing for refugees – and make relevant issues of differential inclusion and internal bordering processes.

While a housing policy with selective elements often provides means testing for entitlement to low-threshold housing – that is, stocks of social housing for disadvantageous groups – the universal model of support has operated through subsidies and tenure legislation, though not directed at specific households but rather within the general market (Bengtsson, 2001: 263–264). The primary purpose of the universal model was not to single out or stigmatize groupings. However, the selective elements that after all exist for refugees do not provide sufficient opportunities for long-term stable housing solutions that can facilitate processes of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Analysing our results, we argue that the outcome of what may be seen as a universal model, with ‘semi-selective’ elements in the housing policy applied to refugees, is a differentiation of inclusion and housing rights, because the housing model is short-term and relies on a neoliberal logic that ignores structural inequalities and is embedded in narratives of deservingness. The model for providing housing for refugees is claimed to be applied on the same terms and claims of financial soundness that are required of everyone else applying for housing. Thus, the local housing strategy for refugees is promoted with the expectation that refugees will, in time, acquire the necessary resources, meaning they will have the ability to work themselves up to a favourable position in the housing market. However – along with the idea of ‘fairness’ in housing queuing – there is no consideration of the actual terms for applying a universal logic. Thus, universalism is based on the existence of actual opportunities for individuals to be or become a competitor on the market. Those with weak positions are meant to receive support from the state (municipality) to acquire opportunities for inclusion. However, the local (universal) model of housing policy, local integration practices and welfare policy appear to be non-communicative vessels, acting based on different realities. The idea that refugees can enter the labour market within a period of two years is in most cases not realistic and not in accord with the actual conditions on the local housing market, where more than eight years of waiting time is required for a first-hand contract in the public housing stock. Here we have a classic Catch-22 situation: adequate, permanent housing is almost a prerequisite for socioeconomic integration, and vice versa.

Moreover, the local practice has led to differentiated inclusion within the group of refugees. This occurs through the filtering and hierarchization process emerging from the nexus of settlement law and migration policy’s fragmentation of residency. The statutory framework introduced by the settlement law also leads in a direction that deviates from the universal logic of recognizing that housing rights apply equally to all inhabitants. The application of this law directs the local administration to differentiate and select those who may and may not make legitimate claims for housing rights. In relation to differentiated inclusion, the present result shows that it is not only the case that refugees lack a stable position as citizens based on their temporary permit. In addition, the Swedish settlement law adds to differentiation and filtering within the group of refugees, dividing them into the categories of ‘self-settlers’ and ‘assigned’ as well as within the migrant categories for which the municipality receives financial coverage.

The application of this kind of ‘semi-selective’ model is poorly suited to individuals of ambiguous migration status because a temporary permit entails several obstacles to social and economic stability. The context of the present case is a municipality with a housing
shortage and long queues for public housing, albeit with a favourable labour market. This becomes a paradoxical situation when the two-year secondary housing contracts end, possibly pushing refugees away to other municipalities where there might be available housing, but few job vacancies. In the nexus of sharpened migration rules and rising thresholds for housing, this can generally be viewed as internal border practices that limit opportunities for local inclusion and belonging, pushing individuals into a prolonged search for housing and stability. In our view, this ambiguous position of being ‘in between’ – inside the nation, but not really entitled to settle down locally –is a striking example of differential inclusion (Könönen, 2018; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2010).

Still, municipalities have central responsibilities concerning the housing market, among others to create good living environments for everyone and to secure housing support for individuals with special needs and in weak positions (SOU 2001:95, p. 84). The municipal administration in our case emphasizes a neoliberal view on individuals’ resources and competitive power to turn opportunities into real resources. However, the housing rights awarded to refugees are not substantial. This is because they have an unfavourable position as regards competing on a market with a shrinking stock of affordable housing and with landlords who can pick and choose among housing applicants and increase their demands concerning tenants’ financial viability. Taken together, these steering mechanisms create a division of housing entitlements that includes some and excludes others and that involves a subcategorization of entitlements (cf. Sahlin, 2020), the outcome being differential housing inclusion. Analysing the local administration’s defence of the ‘universal’ model of distributing housing for refugees, it is fair to say that the universalism of housing policy solutions for refugees is a local narrative more than a policy that works in a universal manner in practice (Borg, 2019; Bengtsson & Grander, 2023). Consequently, instead of becoming part of the universal welfare state, the state, together with local practices, has constructed a plethora of differentiated models for housing and residence that even condition the rights of individuals who have come through the needle’s eye of Swedish asylum controls. Hence, the local housing model we have studied obscures the ideals of universalism and equality.

**Acknowledgement**

This project was funded by FORMAS 2018-00082 *A place for everyone? Sustainable housing and social integration among newly arrived refugees.*

**Bibliography**


