The status of homelessness: Access to housing for asylum-seeking migrants as an instrument of migration control in Italy and Sweden

ENRICO GIANSANTI
Lund University, Sweden

ANNIKA LINDBERG
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

MARTIN JOORMANN
Lund University, Sweden

Abstract
Homelessness and other forms of destitution among asylum-seeking migrants are currently on the rise across Europe, as migrants’ access to social rights, including housing, has been restricted through repressive migration policies, fuelled by the welfare nationalism and chauvinism that surge among European states. This article explores the largely overlooked homelessness experienced by migrants seeking asylum in two different geographic and political contexts: Italy and Sweden. Building on research conducted over six years, including interviews with state officials, social and NGO workers, and testimonies of asylum-seeking migrants, we trace the logics and effects of policies that not only fail to deliver minimum welfare provisions to asylum-seeking migrants, but...
which produce and use homelessness as a way of controlling this group. The implications for asylum-seeking migrants include racialised discrimination, class-based and poverty-related health issues, and other harms, which are the direct result of policies that render access to fundamental social rights, including housing, into instruments of migration control.

**Key words**
asylum and homelessness, Italy and Sweden, migration control, social rights, welfare nationalism and chauvinism

**Introduction**

The municipality does not count people without residence permits. And the people who are counted there are practically those who have approached the social services, saying ‘I don’t have a home’. When [a municipality in Southern Sweden] counts the homeless, they only count the registered citizens. None of the EU citizens, none of the asylum seekers, none of the undocumented migrants (Swedish social worker, interviewed by Giansanti, 2020).

Data from the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) shows that homelessness has increased substantially in the past decade. Over 700,000 people in the EU sleep rough on any given night; a 70% increase since 2010 (Serme-Morin, 2019). Even though the right to shelter is recognised as a fundamental right in European and International Human Rights Law (European Pillar of Social Rights Principle 19; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union Article 34.3), comprehensive government initiatives to eradicate homelessness are rare (Striano, 2019). Moreover, measures to address acute destitution fail short due to the narrow selection and prioritisation criteria used to determine who is homeless and who has the right to access (emergency) accommodation (O’Sullivan, 2020). This has become acutely visible due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, during which many European countries have gone into partial or full lockdown, while people who experience homelessness cannot simply ‘stay at home’. The situation has been particularly severe for asylum-seeking migrants, who often lack access to minimum welfare provisions (see e.g. Nordling and Persdotter, 2021). Moreover, and as the above quote by a Swedish social worker illustrates, people whose asylum applications were rejected were not ‘counted’ as part of the homeless population and, thus, excluded from state measures to address homelessness.
This article investigates the intersection of welfare and migration policies preventing access to housing for asylum-seeking migrants and its impact on their rights and well-being. It draws on three different research projects (Giansanti, 2020; Joormann, 2019; Lindberg, 2020) conducted 2014–2020 in Italy and Sweden. The two countries differ significantly in terms of geographic location, the type and extent of migration, and of immigration control enforcement, and in the organisation and provision of welfare support. Meanwhile, in both Italy and Sweden, access to welfare, including housing, become instrumentalised for governing migrants seeking asylum. The cases thus enable us to trace continuities between southern and northern European countries in terms of how welfare nationalism and chauvinism operate in two otherwise different welfare regimes. Our article answers calls from scholars to, methodologically speaking, think transnationally and trace how immigration enforcement operates through internal border control mechanisms, including the instrumentalization of social policy for the purpose of migration control (e.g. Tervonen et al., 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Thus, the study adds to scholarship tracing how migration control proliferates internally within states across Southern and Northern Europe (Eule et al., 2019; Floros and Jørgensen, 2020) with an analysis of how welfare nationalism and chauvinism hinder asylum-seeking migrants from accessing fundamental rights.

**Welfare nationalism and chauvinism**

This study builds its conceptual framework on prior work by welfare and migration scholars on welfare nationalism and welfare chauvinism (Keskinen et al., 2016; Keskinen’s 2016). Welfare nationalism denotes a ‘commitment to the welfare-related national interests and ideas’ (Suszycki cited in Keskinen 2016: 355). Protecting the national welfare state, and its political and economic stability, is in the focus of welfare nationalism (Suszycki, 2011). Membership is premised upon classed, gendered and racialised notions of belonging – and upon economic performance. Accordingly, poor migrants are framed as a welfare burden (Keskinen, 2016: 366) and, thus, ‘the wrong kinds of migrants’ (ibid. 363); at the same time, welfare nationalism acknowledges the potential of ‘well-integrated immigrants’ becoming able to contribute to the cultural, political, and economic stability of national welfare. Welfare chauvinism is more deeply rooted in ethno-nationalist, essentialist understandings of (non-)Western culture, which justifies restrictive and exclusionary rules regarding the question of who should be allowed to access social welfare. As Keskinen (2016: 366) points out in her analysis of the Finnish context, welfare chauvinist discourse portrays especially migrants from Middle Eastern and African countries as ‘undesired others’. Welfare
Chauvinism is currently rising across European countries – from Italy (Pellegata and Visconti, 2020) to Scandinavia (Jørgensen and Thomsen, 2016; Keskinen et al., 2016) – as governments seek to divert attention from the impact of neoliberal restructuring of welfare states and long-term effects of financial crises, respectively, by creating systems of hierarchical stratification, ostensibly designed to ‘safeguard’ the welfare of the (white) majority population at the expense of the rights and welfare of ‘others’. Welfare chauvinism encompasses and produces racialized and classed exclusions. It portrays racialized migrants as potential burdens on the welfare state, which justifies restrictions in their access to welfare. As a result of these restrictions, they are rendered poor, sometimes even destitute; and their destitution is then instrumentalized to demonstrate that they do indeed present a threat to the welfare model.

Welfare nationalism and chauvinism constantly re-construct the racialized boundaries of neoliberalized welfare states through a responsibilization of the racialized poor for their predicament, and the downsizing of public spending in favor of the (white) majority population (see Keskinen 2016: 356). Therefore, in this article, we analyze the implications of those welfare nationalist and chauvinist politics and demonstrate their severe impacts on asylum-seeking migrants’ lives and their access to fundamental social rights, notably housing.

Producing and using homelessness among migrants seeking asylum in Europe

Critical migration and border scholars have documented how the intensification of border controls across Europe effectively excludes poor and racialised migrants from access to territory, participation, and rights (Balibar and Swenson, 2009; Grosfoguel et al., 2015). The EU’s border reinforcement takes place through militarisation of its external borders (Besteman, 2020); meanwhile, we have seen a proliferation of internal bordering practices that permeate everyday life, which are carried out by a range of state and nonstate actors (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). The internal bordering practices in focus of our study are policies that restrict access to social welfare for asylum-seeking migrants (Bloch and Schuster, 2002) by producing hierarchies of rights and ‘deservingness’ between citizens and migrants and limiting access to support for the latter (Misje, 2020; Nordling and Persdotter, 2021; Rigo, 2019). These policies delineate the boundary of the social welfare state and compel welfare workers to differentiate between lives deserving support, and those who can be left without (Guentner et al., 2016; Mostowska, 2014).

The mechanisms and implications of these bordering practices (Abdelhady et al., 2020; Nordling and Persdotter, 2021) vary between
different political and welfare state contexts. Prior research has shown how these practices in more and less regulated welfare regimes draw on welfare chauvinism for their justification (Keskinen et al., 2016), and how they subject migrants seeking asylum and/or holding temporary, precarious residence status to poverty and to exploitative working conditions (Emmenegger and Careja, 2013; Floros and Jørgensen, 2020). Thus, they fuel the racialisation of poverty and destitution, while portraying migrants as responsible for their destitute condition (Sahlin, 2020). Therefore, in this article, we analyse bordering through welfare regulations as an ongoing process, which produces homelessness among asylum-seeking migrants (Baptista et al., 2016; FEANTSA, 2019) and which uses this homelessness as a tool of immigration control (see also Misje, 2020; Vickers, 2020).

Methodology

The research underpinning this article builds on three distinct projects, conducted between 2014 and 2020, which focused on:

a) the housing situation for people with precarious resident statuses (Giansanti),
b) the implementation of detention and deportation processes (Lindberg),
c) the processes whereby a migration bureaucracy constructs categories of ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ refugees (Joormann).

Giansanti’s research in Italy encompassed interviews with coordinators, case-workers and social workers at SIPROIMI\(^1\), SPRAR\(^2\) and CAS\(^3\) centres, where people seeking asylum are housed. Moreover, activists from an NGO supporting homeless people, one nurse working at a health care facility for undocumented people, one nurse from an NGO supporting drug addicts, and four asylum-seeking migrants contributed with their narratives. In Sweden, Giansanti conducted interviews with social workers and one psychologist from two different NGOs and one church congregation which support people experiencing homelessness, an NGO supporting young families without a home, and three asylum-seeking migrants who arrived in Sweden in 2014. The two other research projects (Lindberg and Joormann) were mainly concerned with ‘studying up’ (Nader, 1972) the relatively powerful actors tasked with enforcing migration control in Sweden: from Lindberg’s ethnography of deportation enforcement, we draw in this article on interviews with legal advisors, NGOs and social workers supporting migrants whose asylum applications have been rejected in Sweden, and interviews with migrants living under threat of deportation. From Joormann’s research, we
draw on interviews with judges who decide asylum cases at Sweden’s Migration Court of Appeal. In short, from our three projects, we sampled the data that is, qualitatively speaking, the most relevant for our analysis of the instrumentalization of welfare policy for immigration control. All the research material generated in the three projects informs our understanding of the subject matter and, thus, this study of the homelessness experienced by asylum-seeking migrants in Italy and Sweden.

Several of the research participants cited in this article had experienced precarious forms of housing and/or rough sleeping at different stages of their asylum process. Against this background, we understand asylum-seeking migrants’ experiences of homelessness as encompassing situations where people are held in temporary, precarious housing situations, and when they lack access to shelter altogether. Often, research participants would alter between these conditions, depending on changes in their legal status.

We undertook the qualitative thematic analysis (see Bryman, 2016) of the empirical material collectively. From each of our projects, we identified the material that spoke to the issue of homelessness among people seeking asylum, which we shared and discussed together amongst us authors, using an iterative-inductive approach, where we oscillated between data analysis and theorising (see O’Reilly, 2012). From this collective analysis emerged the themes discussed in the article: namely, the state-sanctioned production of homelessness among asylum-seeking migrants, the structural violence of destitution, and the prevalence of racism as a lived experience and as endemic to the bordering of welfare states.

To ensure the anonymity of all research participants, their names and, where applicable, the organisations they work for have been anonymised. As (white, European) researchers, we are part of the power relations that shape policies of migration control (Cabot, 2019). While we aim to shed light on and challenge the harms inflicted by the migration control regime (Mayblin et al., 2019: 117), we are conscious that researching the multiple ‘crises’ of displacement entails a risk of reproducing state-centric problematisations of migration (see Kalir et al., 2019). By systematically contrasting state actors’ accounts with the lived experiences of migrants, we hope to balance the perspectives.

Some limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. Our research participants with experience of seeking asylum all identified as men. Hence, women and gender-queer migrants’ experiences of homelessness are not accounted for here (the specific vulnerabilities that women seeking asylum are forced to deal with have been examined in previous research; see e.g. Canning, 2020). We should also emphasise that our article is not a comparative study of housing and migration control policies in Italy and Sweden. Instead, we seek to think transnationally and to trace continuities in the research participants’ experiences of moving to, within and through different
legal, political and geographical spaces, which are nevertheless connected through a range of common legal frameworks. Both Italy and Sweden form part of the Schengen Area, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and share several frameworks for migration control, including the EU Asylum Reception Directive, the Asylum Procedures Directive, and the Dublin III Regulation; legal regimes, which push people seeking asylum cycles of confinement and onward circulation (Wyss, 2019). By tracing continuities, commonalities and differences between Italy and Sweden, we seek to contribute to the critical analysis of a larger phenomenon: the increasing problem of homelessness among migrants in Europe (O’Sullivan, 2020: 17).

**Homelessness among asylum-seeking migrants in Italy and Sweden**

The welfare system in Sweden is very good. But it depends if you are in or out, so if you are in you have all the benefits of an advanced system, but if you are out, it is terrible, you live in most absolute poverty, there is nothing you can do (Swedish social worker, interviewed by Giansanti, 2020).

The quote is by an NGO worker supporting young people whose applications for asylum have been rejected and who have subsequently been pushed into homelessness. The NGO provides them with shelter, food, psychological and other healthcare services when hospital visits can be avoided. Hence, the quote illustrates the challenges that people who lack legal authorisation to remain tend to experience when seeking access to welfare support in highly bureaucratised welfare states such as Sweden.

Sweden’s relatively generous asylum reception system underwent significant changes in a restrictive direction since 2015 (Abdelhady et al., 2020). Restrictions in access to welfare for migrants seeking asylum were adopted by the Social Democratic government under the pretext of the welfare state being overburdened by migrants who posed a threat to the welfare, safety – and imagined racial homogeneity – of the Swedish nation (Schierup et al., 2018). Today, half a decade later, the focus of many political debates is still on how to further reduce the number of migrants seeking asylum, increase deportations, and how to manage populations in socio-economically disadvantaged areas and cities where housing segregation is strongly classed and racialised.

As noted by the NGO worker quoted above, being unregistered in Sweden means being barred from accessing most welfare state services. People who enter the asylum process in Sweden enjoy partial and conditional access to housing and welfare benefits according to Act (1994:137) on the
reception of asylum seekers and others (hereafter LMA). They can choose to be housed in accommodation units or to find private housing and receive a daily allowance and access to emergency healthcare. Children have access to schooling and are entitled to the same access to healthcare as citizen children. Adults are only allowed to work if they are considered ‘cooperative’ in the asylum process.

Asylum-seeking migrants in Sweden face substantial barriers to social and economic inclusion, amplified by the fact that many accommodation units are in remote rural areas (Canning, 2020). For migrants whose asylum applications have been rejected, these barriers intensify. According to a 2016 amendment to LMA, access to accommodation and financial support is withdrawn after a negative asylum decision in all but a few exceptional cases where such enforced destitution is regarded as ‘obviously unfair’ (Kjellbom and Lundberg, 2018). Previously, these people could have relied on emergency assistance from the municipality where they reside, but a recent decision of the Supreme Administrative Court stated that municipalities are not responsible or obliged to provide such assistance to a person who remains in Sweden to avoid an expulsion order (HFD 2017 ref. 33). Municipal emergency shelters for people sleeping rough have no obligation to offer space to unregistered migrants. As a result, most people whose applications for protection in Sweden have been rejected are pushed into destitution without access to accommodation or financial aid. Linking back to our conceptual discussion above, the welfare nationalist ideas behind this policy change become visible. The LMA amendment was justified with reference to the Swedish reception and welfare system being ‘overburdened’ with asylum-seeking migrants (Lindberg, 2020). Hence, destitution is on the one hand used to push asylum-seeking migrants out of the country, and on the other, as a form of deterrence (Joormann, 2020; Nordling and Persdotter, 2021), sending the message to asylum-seeking migrants that they will not be allowed to access welfare provisions, which are reserved for Swedish citizens. In other words, LMA is an example of how homelessness is produced and used as a tool for regulating migration, as the convergence of welfare policy and immigration control puts asylum-seeking migrants at risk of destitution (see also O’Sullivan, 2020: 66–69). Behind these exclusionary policies is a welfare chauvinist rhetoric that portrays asylum-seeking migrants as ‘undeserving’ (Keskinen et al., 2016), and as a threat to the welfare of the nation, while disguising how the erosion of welfare services – including the lack of housing – is due to long-standing neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state (Schierup et al., 2018).

The Italian welfare state has gradually been diminished and reconfigured through series of austerity measures in the past decades. Social service provisions, including assistance to people experiencing homelessness, are managed by the municipalities since 2001, and there are significant
inconsistencies in terms of the extent and types of services offered across the country (Fazzini, 2015): in 2010, there were 727 municipal and non-governmental organizations that provided such services in 158 municipalities. Most of the services are concentrated in the northern regions. There is also a sharp differentiation between ‘insiders’ of the welfare system, and ‘outsiders’, the latter encompassing migrants as well as workers in the informal economy, who have limited access to social welfare support (Chiaromonte, 2020). Researchers have suggested that the combination of a strong formal exclusion of migrants and significant informal toleration of their presence (and participation in the informal economy) renders Italy into a case of ‘strong fencing and weak gatekeeping’ (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini, 2011: 251). Migrants’ access to the welfare system has been increasingly politicised, particularly by right-wing politicians such as Salvini, who have propagated for the exclusion of migrants from welfare under the device ‘Prima gli italiani’, i.e. ‘Italians first’. This statement reflects a welfare chauvinist position, which has gained traction in Italy throughout the 2010s (Pellegata and Visconti, 2020).

To access publicly funded shelters and homelessness services in Italy, one must be registered as having the legal right to reside in the country (Decree Law 286/1998). People seeking asylum are housed in temporary reception centres, often run by private actors contracted by the state. They have access to social assistance during the asylum determination process. Those who have obtained refugee status or subsidiary protection (Department of Civil Protection, 2018) have access to the welfare system (Art.27 of Legislative Decree, 251/2007). However, partly due to the complexity of the Italian reception system, there are instances in which access to healthcare, education and daily allowance are denied because local authorities wrongly differentiated between those holding refugee status and those who were granted subsidiary protection (ASGI, 2019). People whose application for asylum is rejected do not have access to social rights and must rely on NGOs or personal networks to access housing and healthcare (Ambrosini, 2015), which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. The privatisation, outsourcing and uneven implementation of (social) housing services, all of which has been aggravated during years of economic recession and the subsequent austerity and neoliberal restructuring (Pellegata and Visconti, 2020), limit the access to welfare services for people seeking asylum in Italy, even in cases where they are legally entitled to this support.

The overview above demonstrates how the two different politico-legal contexts and differently organised welfare regimes in Italy and Sweden limit asylum-seeking migrants’ access to essential social rights, including housing. In Italy, this happens through policy restrictions, but also because of the gap between the formal and actual access to welfare in a state with ‘weak gatekeeping’ (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini, 2011). In Sweden, precarious housing conditions and destitution among asylum-seeking migrants
are arguably more orchestrated and institutionalised, as repressive policies are justified with reference to the welfare state being ‘overburdened’ with asylum seekers. Due to the fragmented and to a certain extent informal organisation of welfare, Italy has a larger non-governmental humanitarian sector providing support for migrants who are excluded from public welfare provisions. By contrast, asylum-seeking migrants in Sweden face challenges when trying to get by without access to social welfare in a highly regulated, bureaucratised welfare state (see Lindberg, 2020). The re-structuring of asylum reception can be identified across both cases, as can the resulting vulnerability, destitution, and exploitation that many asylum-seeking migrants face. In the empirical sections that follow, we trace the shame, the classed forms of structural violence, and the racism, which are intertwined with these re-bordering practices of Italy and Sweden.

**Experiencing precarious housing and exclusion**

In 2019, Giansanti met Kapema, then 27 years of age, in an apartment run by an NGO in which Kapema had been living for the previous six months. He had arrived in Italy in 2008 as an unaccompanied minor and was granted humanitarian protection for three years. However, after he turned 18, his application for a renewed residence permit was rejected. After having been homeless for almost 13 years, Kapema managed to have his case reviewed and was granted humanitarian protection. Reflecting on the time that had passed, Kapema said:

> It has been a terrible experience because I had two major problems. When I arrived as a minor, I was put in a SPRAR and after they did not renew the contract I went sleeping in the streets. I am ashamed because of that.

Upon leaving the SPRAR centre, Kapema was expecting a sum of money from the state that should have paid his rent. However, he did not receive it and remained homeless. He explained:

> First, they told me they give me money to find [a] house for six months. I did everything by myself. Then the money they give you is not for six months, [which would be] 1700 euros, but they say 400 euros. I did not sign, no I did not sign.

Kapema refused the lower sum of money. It turned out that his situation was not unique: In 2019, Giansanti spoke to Gianluca, a social worker employed at an organisation that is part of a larger cooperative of NGOs in Italy. Gianluca confirmed stories of unscrupulous people who set up bogus
reception centres while receiving government funding without providing any type of reception or support.

A ghost cooperative in Northern Italy called Caribù has been investigated for allegedly defrauding the state of 1.3 million euros. They invoiced double and said to be sending the kids to work in the fields and other places even though they were not there.

Kapema’s case and Ginaluca’s account illustrate how the asylum reception system can become a source of exploitation and extraction for private actors. As a result, welfare support designed for people who, like Kapema, find themselves in a highly precarious condition is often stretched so thin that it becomes insignificant.

While asylum-seeking migrants in Sweden partly encounter different challenges in accessing accommodation, we find similarities in the neoliberal logic and gradual restrictions in access to social rights. Particularly in the wake of the sharp rise in the number of asylum applications in 2015/16, temporary forms of housing were opened all over Sweden. Several entrepreneurs managed to turn the lack of public accommodation facilities into a profitable letting business for private actors. While private businesses made money by housing them, many asylum-seeking migrants found themselves becoming stuck in bureaucratic labyrinths. This can be illustrated by the story of Mamet, who arrived in Stockholm in late 2015 and whom Giansanti met in 2019. Soon after his arrival, Mamet was placed in a reception centre run by the SMA in Sundsvall, 280 kilometres north of Stockholm. Mamet could not stand the cold, so he travelled to Landskrona (South Sweden), where he stayed with a family he knew through his mother. After three months, Mamet realised he was no longer in the system and contacted the SMA. He was subsequently placed in a refugee camp in Röstånga, 40 kilometres from Landskrona. Mamet felt a great sense of frustration during the nine months between his arrival and the day he was granted asylum.

As the accounts presented above show, the Swedish and Italian asylum systems both offer some – albeit limited – access to social welfare provisions, including accommodation. However, as illustrated by Kapema’s and Mamet’s stories, this accommodation is only precarious housing, as it is temporary, conditional, and often uncertain. Their accounts demonstrate how asylum-seeking migrants, in both Italy and Sweden, live at risk of (or already in) destitution – a condition associated with material deprivation, social exclusion and limited control over their own lives (see also PROGRESS, 2014) – even as they formally have access to (emergency) shelter and (limited) welfare provisions. In response to the unreliable and at times outright lack of access to support, they have to ‘do everything for themselves’ (Kapema) or rely on informal connections and support networks (Mamet). Meanwhile, Kapema and Mamet
experienced feelings of shame, stigma, frustration, and social isolation because of their precarious housing situations. Other studies of migrants living on limited welfare provisions in the asylum system have presented similar findings, demonstrating how the stigma of poverty adds to the racial discrimination, inferiorisation and exclusion that they experience from (hostile) ‘host societies’ (Mayblin et al., 2019). Next, therefore, we highlight the physical and mental harms caused by homelessness; harms which, as Kapema’s case illustrates, tend to accumulate over time.

The structural violence of homelessness

Many people who lack legal authorisation to remain in Italy are affected by serious health problems and are left to rely on support from NGOs. In 2019, Giansanti met a nurse working for a health clinic offering services to undocumented migrants. The nurse recounted the broad variety of physical and psychological conditions that these people had to deal with while experiencing homelessness, including chronic diseases, substance abuse, and psychiatric problems. Iqbal, a man from Pakistan whom Giansanti met and who became homeless when his asylum application was rejected in Italy, shared that he had thought he was going to die during the cold winters, and recalled feeling isolated and stigmatised while sleeping rough. To cope with the cold, he had resorted to grabbing the first public transport he found in the mornings, but experienced people not wanting to sit next to him, giving him ‘hostile gazes’. Unable to communicate properly with them, he felt he was reduced to an ‘animal’.

Iqbal’s narrative testifies to the physical and mental hardships associated with rough sleeping. The nurse’s account above also exemplifies the severe health implications of homelessness and the limited access to health services for asylum-seeking migrants, which risk aggravating their poverty-related health conditions. In addition, Iqbal’s reflection demonstrates how homelessness can lead to social isolation and stigmatisation. The hostility he experienced from the Italian public led him to feel dehumanised, like an ‘animal’.

Our research participants in Sweden were also vocal about the causal relationship between migration policies that restricted access to welfare and ill-health among asylum-seeking migrants. According to the social workers and NGO staff we interviewed, the impact of these restrictions was particularly acute among migrants whose asylum applications had been rejected. A social worker responsible for youth who had arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors noted:

So, for a lot of these people who are denied asylum but granted temporary residency because they are still studying, they were not counted as socially homeless
people. They were part of the structurally homeless.7 We have a lot of cases of exploitation because they don’t have anywhere to stay so they stay at home with people that might be expecting different things from them. There have been several cases of sexual exploitation (Social worker, interviewed by Giansanti, 2019, our emphasis in italics).

Becoming homeless exacerbates existing health problems and renders people vulnerable to exploitation. Other social workers we interviewed in Sweden also witnessed people being pushed into substance abuse. Those running shelters recorded an increase in the number of guests who were intoxicated. The social worker quoted above called it a ‘kind of circle’, where young people who were compelled to sell sex for survival were more likely to resort to substance abuse, since ‘you will self-medicate just to try to get over what you are doing’. Indeed, several social workers we spoke with highlighted how the stress that many asylum-seeking migrants experienced due to an uncertain future, not knowing where they would sleep or where and when they would have their next meal, propelled them into a sense of despair. Some of them felt compelled to leave Sweden to escape these hardships. An NGO worker recounted:

Many of them have a network and are moving around but some have nobody to turn to at all. They are on the street, and they never experienced being homeless before. It’s really tough the first time. The most difficult thing is to make them stay: in order for us to be able to work with them, they have to be able to live somewhere, otherwise they just sleep on a night bus or at McDonald’s. If you do that you can’t think about the long term. They move to another EU country; they flee once more. They hope it’s going to work out in Germany, that they will seek asylum and at least find a place to live. […] Some young people keep travelling around to survive. It’s still better than returning to the country they came from (Swedish NGO worker, interviewed by Lindberg in 2017).

Among those who tried this strategy was Rohullah, a young Afghan man whose application for asylum had been rejected in Sweden. When Lindberg met him in France in 2017, he was sleeping rough under a bridge while waiting to have his asylum application registered. He said: ‘We feel like Europe is our prison. Wherever we go after a rejection, they send us back to Sweden.’ Rohullah found it exhausting to be pushed to move on, only to have to wait for another round of bureaucratic procedures: ‘It’s so difficult to live underground. All the waiting, it takes over everything… if you get positive, life can start. But if you don’t you will have to start all over.’

Rohullah was disappointed and frustrated that the Swedish asylum system, which had trapped him in a space of rightlessness and pushed him
into a condition of uncertain waiting under squalid conditions. Like Rohullah – and contrary to common assumptions that Northern European countries are the final ‘destination countries’ for people seeking asylum – many people whose asylum cases were rejected in Denmark, Norway or Sweden travel back to southern Europe, including France, Spain and Italy, to evade deportation (Elsrud, 2020). In these southern European countries, their chances for regularisation are often higher, yet the move also entails the risk of having to ‘start all over’, ending up in informal jobs and exploitation (Floros and Jørgensen, 2020).

This exposure to destitution and exploitation is linked to the racialisation of asylum-seeking migrants, and their different class positions, which will influence their chances to obtain legal residency. A lack of sufficient economic (and often social and cultural, see Bourdieu, 1984) capital forces especially poor migrants to rely on precarious, informal jobs. Several of our research participants faced such classed forms of structural violence. This violence and the resulting exploitation cause physical, social and psychological harms including exhaustion, depression, and substance abuse (see Canning, 2020; Mayblin et al., 2019: 118). Moreover, in both Italy and Sweden, our research participants highlighted how everyday racism amplified these harms and shaped their everyday lives.

**Racism and the denial of vulnerability**

In 2019, Giansanti met Abass and Issa, two young men from North Africa. They had arrived in Italy as minors in 2014 and while going through the integration process they felt welcomed and managed to make Italian friends among their age peers. However, when the rhetoric against migrants became the focus of public debate, their experiences shifted. Some of their Italian friends had since stopped talking to them, and Abass described how the atmosphere at his workplace had become heavier; while most of their colleagues remained friendly, some became openly racist, and others started speaking behind his back. Abass and Issa both recounted how they were often stopped and searched by the police for no apparent reason, and how some of their friends had experienced police brutality, having been picked up from the streets and beaten up in police custody. Towards the end of the interview, which took place in an open public space in the city centre, when a police car drove past, both Abass and Issa were frightened due to the racial profiling they regularly experienced.

Abass and Issa’s experiences illustrate how everyday discrimination and hostility from the public, and racial profiling and violence from authorities, shape their presence and everyday lives in Italy. In both Italy and Sweden, institutional racism also underpinned the different state authorities’
differentiations between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrants (see also Bonjour and Chauvin, 2018), where those falling into the latter category were perceived as responsible for their own rejection and destitute condition. A Swedish migration court judge stated:

[…] especially in Stockholm, those unaccompanied minors have been the Moroccan children living on the street. I can say that I think that we have many LVU [cases of taking children into care] which concern precisely unaccompanied minors, because they have a socially disintegrating behaviour, they are addicted to drugs, they roam around, as one talks about in the Social Service Act, they have not stayed in one place and so on. I think that, in the eyes of the people, this becomes a problem as well. […] And it happens a lot – especially the Moroccan boys – that they do not get a residence permit, and then they don’t get any housing or they get housing and then one is so aggressive that one cannot stay at the housing. And, so, they live at Sergels Torg [a square in central Stockholm], by selling drugs, and by prostitution. This is a vicious circle, because this does lower people’s tolerance, and then, those who really need protection, they ride along in the same category (Swedish judge, quoted in Joormann, 2019: 28–9).

In this interview excerpt, the judge suggests that the ‘Moroccan boys’ are responsible for their homelessness, since they are portrayed as being ‘so aggressive’ that they cannot ‘get any housing’ and, instead, try to survive on the street ‘by selling drugs, and by prostitution’. In Sweden, young men from Morocco are often targeted by racist stereotyping. In far-right discourse, which has slipped into parts of mainstream public debate, they are regularly referred to as ‘beard children’; a racist caricature which serves to posit them as deceitful and a threat to public security and order, and which effectively denies them the vulnerability and ‘innocence’ afforded to other children (Hedlund, 2015). Besides being stigmatising, the circulation of racist tropes and police practices of racial profiling reinforce a criminalising imaginary of (here young, male, Moroccan) asylum-seeking migrants, which leave them in extremely vulnerable conditions, and legitimise their exclusion from rights (Keskinen et al., 2016). The case also illustrates how, in addition to race and class, constructions of deservingness, exposure to state violence, and access to welfare, are structured along the lines of gender and age.

Conclusion

This article has shed light on homelessness among asylum-seeking migrants in Sweden and Italy. Their homelessness often goes uncounted, as demonstrated in the introductory quote by a Swedish social worker. This practice of ‘not
counting’ certain experiences of homelessness is not only a direct result but increasingly often also the purpose of the convergence of migration and welfare policies in a time of rising welfare nationalism and chauvinism across European countries. The article has traced how these logics posit people seeking protection as potential burdens to the state and justify severe restrictions in their access to essential welfare. Moreover, we have shed light on the consequences of the rise of homelessness among asylum-seeking migrants throughout Europe. Among them are numerous preventable social and health-related harms, which are unevenly distributed in ways that follow the racialised and classed stratifications of society (see Mayblin et al., 2019).

Our analysis found significant continuities in terms of how these bordering practices impacted especially poor and racialised migrants in both Italy and Sweden. While these countries differ in terms of their geographical positions and their migration and welfare policy regimes, we could observe how the restrictions in migrants’ access to welfare produced destitution among asylum-seeking migrants and pushed them into onward mobility. This underscores the observation made elsewhere that the ‘EUropean’ migration regime traps people in poverty and instability (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), and in circular mobility, as Europe turns towards increasingly repressive and deterrence-oriented asylum and immigration policies (see Lindberg, 2020; Wyss, 2019). The issue has only become more acute during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, when destitute migrants have been excluded from many of the protective mechanisms afforded to (white) citizens.

Despite their acute nature, the discriminatory, poverty-inducing, and harmful nature of bordering practices directed against asylum-seeking migrants go largely unmentioned in public and political debates. Their ‘slow violence’ (Mayblin et al., 2019) and the welfare nationalist and chauvinist politics (Keskinen, 2016) they rely on might partly explain how such extreme exclusion is normalized. Given the increase of homelessness among migrants throughout Europe (O’Sullivan, 2020: 17), and the severe social and health-related implications of their exclusion from welfare services, it is of vital importance that scholars and practitioners challenge the naturalisation of welfare nationalist and chauvinist discourses that jeopardise asylum-seeking migrants’ rights and well-being. Therefore, critical research should (re-)conceptualise homelessness as politically produced, and highlight that it warrants comprehensive, welfare-oriented solutions, decoupled from immigration control regimes. This can also be an opportunity to draw novel links between alternative social support structures and organise networks of solidarity that transcend nation-state boundaries.

Acknowledgements
This research has been financially supported by Helge Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse. Eda Hatice Farsakoglu provided valuable input on the content of the
study, and James Root proofread an earlier version of the manuscript. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thorough and constructive feedback, and the individuals and organizations who generously shared their time and their sometimes painful experiences and analytical insights with us. The authors contributed equally in reviewing the literature, in processing and analysing the material, and in writing the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Authorship of this article by Helge Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse.

Notes
1. Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors – Sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati in Italian – These centres replaced the SPRAR centres (see note below).
2. Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees – Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati in Italian.
3. Extraordinary Reception Centre – Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria in Italian.
4. Some of the NGO staff are nurses who can provide basic healthcare. People whose asylum applications have been rejected are entitled to emergency healthcare, yet many fear that contacting public authorities, including hospitals, might result in the SMA or the police finding their whereabouts.
5. Since 2020, asylum-seeking migrants choosing to live in areas that are categorized as dealing with ‘socio-economic challenges’ are denied LMA.
6. To fulfill the conditions to be granted exception from the ‘obligation to hold work permit’ (AT-UND) while seeking asylum in Sweden, a person must prove that they cooperate in clarifying their identity, that they are not subjected to the Dublin Regulation, and must be considered to hold a ‘substantial’ asylum claim (Migrationsverket, n.d.).
7. ‘Social homelessness’ here refers to homelessness that is ‘caused’ by problems such as drug addiction or mental health, in which cases, the Swedish social services have a duty to help. In the case of ‘structural homelessness’, where the cause of homelessness is unemployment or poverty, social services are not obliged to assist.
References

Abdelhady D, Gren N and Joormann M (2020) Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in Northern Europe: An introduction. In: Abdelhady D, Gren N and Joormann M (eds) Refugees and the Violence of Welfare Bureaucracies in Northern Europe. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 1–28.

Ambrosini M (2015) NGOs and health services for irregular immigrants in Italy: When the protection of human rights challenges the laws. Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies 13(2): 116–134.

ASGI - Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull’Immigrazione (2019) Rights without borders – The refugee’s right to social assistance. Available at: https://www.asgi.it/asilo-e-protezione-internazionale/diritto-assistenza-sociale-rifugiati/ (accessed 20 October 2020).

Balibar E and Swenson J (2009) We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Baptista I, Benjaminsen L, Busch-Geertsema V, et al. (2016) Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Homelessness: The Humanitarian Crisis and the Homelessness Sector in Europe. Research Report, FEANTSA, Brussels, December.

Besteman C (2020) Militarized Global Apartheid. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bloch A and Schuster L (2002) Asylum and welfare: Contemporary debates. Critical Social Policy 22(3): 393–414.

Bonjour S and Chauvin S (2018) Social class, migration policy and migrant strategies: An introduction. International Migration 56(4): 5–18.

Bourdieu P (1984) Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bryman A (2016) Social Research Methods. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cabot H (2019) The business of anthropology and the European refugee regime. American Ethnologist 45(3): 261–275.

Canning V (2020) Bureaucratised banality: Asylum and immobility in Britain, Denmark and Sweden. In: Abdelhady D, Gren N and Joormann M (eds) Refugees and the Violence of Welfare Bureaucracies in Northern Europe. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 210–226.

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012/C 326/02) Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT&from=EN (accessed: 8 September 2020).

Chiaramonte W (2020) Migrants’ access to social protection in Italy. In: Jean-Michel L and Daniela V (eds) Migration and Social Protection in Europe and Beyond (Volume 1): Comparing Access to Welfare Entitlements. pp. 241–256.

Decree Law (25 July 1998) n. 286 – Testo unico delle disposizioni concernenti la disciplina dell’immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero. Gazzetta Ufficiale. Available at: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1998/08/18/098G0348/sg (accessed: 8 August 2020).
Department of Civil Protection – Presidency of the Council of Ministers (2018) Subsidiary Protection. Available at: http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/pagine-servizio/dettaglio-approfondimenti/-/asset_publisher/default/content/protezione-sussidiaria (accessed: 2 October 2020).

Elserud T (2020) Resisting social death with dignity. The strategy of re-escaping among young asylum-seekers in the wake of Sweden’s sharpened asylum Laws. European Journal of Social Work. Epub ahead of print 28 January 2020.

Emmenegger P and Careja R (2013) The ‘other’ dualism: Welfare state nationalism and migratory policies in Western Europe. In: Karolewski IP and Suszycki AM (eds) European Welfare States: Citizenship, Nationalism and Conflict. Osnabrück: Fibre Verlag, pp. 75–106.

Eule T, Borrelli L, Lindberg A, et al. (2019) Migrants Before the Law: Contested Migration Control in Europe. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fazzini O (2015) Homelessness E Servizi Per I Senza Fissa Dimora in Italia E in Lombardia. PoliS Lombardia. Available at: Homelessness_servizi_senza_fissa_dimora.pdf (accessed 24/02/2021).

FEANTSA (2019) Homeless in Europe – The state of emergency shelter. Available at: https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Resources/magazine/2019/Spring/Homeless_in_Europe_magazine_-_Spring_2019.pdf (accessed: 24 August 2020).

Floros K and Jørgensen MB (2020) Tracing the future of migrants’ labour relations. Experiences of institutionalised migrant precarity in Denmark and Greece. Political Geography 77: 102120.

Giansanti E, 2020. Access to Social Justice: the Intersection of Homelessness and Migration in Europe. A Multiple Case Study of Italy and Sweden. Master’s Thesis. Lund University: Department of Sociology of Law.

Grosfoguel R, Oso L and Christou A (2015) Racism. Intersectionality and Migration Studies: Framing Some Theoretical Reflections. Identities 22(6): 635–652.

Guentner S, Lukes S, Stanton R, et al. (2016) Bordering practices in the UK welfare system. Critical Social Policy 36(3): 391–411.

Hedlund D (2015) Beard boys: standing in the way of a transformation of the self. In: Hällgren C, Dunkels E and Frånberg GM (eds) Invisible boy: The Making of Contemporary Masculinities. Umeå: Umeå University, pp. 83–94.

Joorman M (2019) Legitimized Refugees – A Critical Investigation of Legitimacy Claims within the Precedents of Swedish Asylum Law. Lund: Lund University.

Joorman M (2020) Social class, economic capital and the Swedish, German and Danish asylum systems. In: Abdelhady D, Gren N and Joorman M (eds) Refugees and the Violence of Welfare Bureaucracies in Northern Europe. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Jørgensen MB and Thomsen TL (2016) Deservingness in the Danish context: Welfare chauvinism in times of crisis. Critical Social Policy 36(3): 330–351.

Kalir B, Achermann C and Rosset D (2019) Re-searching access: What do attempts at studying migration control tell us about the state? Social Anthropology 27(S1): 5–16.
Keskinen S (2016) From welfare nationalism to welfare chauvinism: Economic rhetoric, the welfare state and changing asylum policies in Finland. *Critical Social Policy* 36(3): 352–370.

Keskinen S, Norocel OC and Jørgensen MB (2016) The politics and policies of welfare chauvinism under the economic crisis. *Critical Social Policy* 36(3): 321–329.

Kjellbom P and Lundberg A (2018) Olika rättsliga rum för en skälig levnadsnivå?: En rättskartografisk analys av SoL och LMA i domstolspraktiken. *Nordisk socialrättslig tidskrift* 17–18: 59–71.

Legislative Decree 251/2007 (Art.27). Gazzetta Ufficiale. Available at: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/stampa/serie_generale/originario (accessed: 20 October 2020).

Lindberg A (2020) Minimum rights policies targeting people seeking protection in Denmark and Sweden. In: Abdelhady D, Gren N and Joormann M (eds) *Refugees and the Violence of European Welfare Bureaucracies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mayblin L, Wake M and Kazemi M (2019) Necropolitics and the slow violence of the everyday: Asylum seeker welfare in the postcolonial present. *Sociology*: 0038038519862124.

Migrationsverket (n.d.) ‘Arbeta under tiden som asylsökande’. Available at: https://www.migrationsverket.se/Privatpersoner/Skydd-och-asyl-i-Sverige/Medan-du-vantar/Arbeta.html (accessed: 11 September 2020).

Misje T (2020) Social work and welfare bordering: The case of homeless EU migrants in Norway. *European Journal of Social Work* 23(3): 401–413.

Mostowska M (2014) ‘We shouldn’t but we do …’: Framing the strategies for helping homeless EU migrants in Copenhagen and Dublin. *The British Journal of Social Work* 44(1): 18–34.

Nader L (1972) Up the anthropologist: Perspectives gained from studying up. In: Hymns D (ed.) *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Random House, pp. 284–311.

Nordling V and Persdotter L (2021) Bordering through destitution: The case of social assistance to irregularised migrants in malmö, Sweden. *Nordic Social Work Research* 11(2): 155–168.

O’Reilly K (2012) *Ethnographic Methods*. Taylor & Francis.

O’Sullivan E (2020) *Reimagining Homelessness*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Pellegata and Visconti F (2020) Transnationalism and Welfare Chauvinism in Italy: evidence from the 2018 election campaign. *South European Society and Politics*. Online First

PROGRESS (2014) Study on mobility, migration and destitution in the European Union. *European Commission*. Available at: file:///Users/annikalindberg/Downloads/KE-02-14-805-EN-N%20(1).pdf (accessed 30 November 2020).

Rigo E (2019) Re-gendering the border: Chronicles of women’s resistance and unexpected alliances from the Mediterranean border. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 18(1): 173–186.
Sahlin I (2020) Moving targets: On reducing public responsibilities through re-categorising homeless people and refugees. *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(1): 27–54.

Schierup CU, Ålund A and Neergaard A (2018) ‘Race’ and the upsurge of antagonistic popular movements in Sweden. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41(10): 1837–1854.

Serme-Morin C (2019) The state of emergency shelters in Europe. FEANTSA, Spring, 2.

Striano M (2019) Access to shelters for irregular migrants. FEANTSA, Spring, 8.

Suszycki A (2011) Welfare nationalism: conceptual and theoretical considerations. In: Suszycki A (ed.) *Welfare Citizenship and Welfare Nationalism. NordWel Studies in Historical Welfare State Research II*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, pp. 51–77.

Tervonen M, Pellander S and Yuval-Davis N (2018) Everyday bordering in the Nordic countries. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 8(3): 139–142.

Triandafyllidou A and Ambrosini M (2011) Irregular immigration control in Italy and Greece: Strong fencing and weak gate-keeping serving the labour market. *European Journal of Migration and Law* 13: 251–273.

Vickers T (2020) Activist conceptualisations at the migration-welfare nexus: Racial capitalism, austerity and the hostile environment’. *Critical Social Policy*. doi:10.1177/0261018320948026

Wyss A (2019) Stuck in mobility? Interrupted Journeys of Migrants with Precarious Legal Status in Europe. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 17(1): 77–93.

Yuval-Davis N, Wemyss G and Cassidy K (2019) *Bordering*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

**Author biographies**

**Enrico Giansanti** holds a BA in Law from the University of Leicester and an MSc in Sociology of Law from Lund University.

**Annika Lindberg** holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Bern. She is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg. Recent publications have appeared in *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform* and the edited volume *Stealing Time: Migration, Temporalities, and State Violence* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

**Martin Joormann** holds a BSc in Sociology from the University of Gothenburg, a MA in Social Sciences from Humboldt University Berlin, and a PhD in Sociology of Law from Lund University. He is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at Lund’s Sociology of Law Department. Recent publications include the edited volume *Refugees and the Violence of Welfare Bureaucracies in Northern Europe* (Manchester University Press, 2020).