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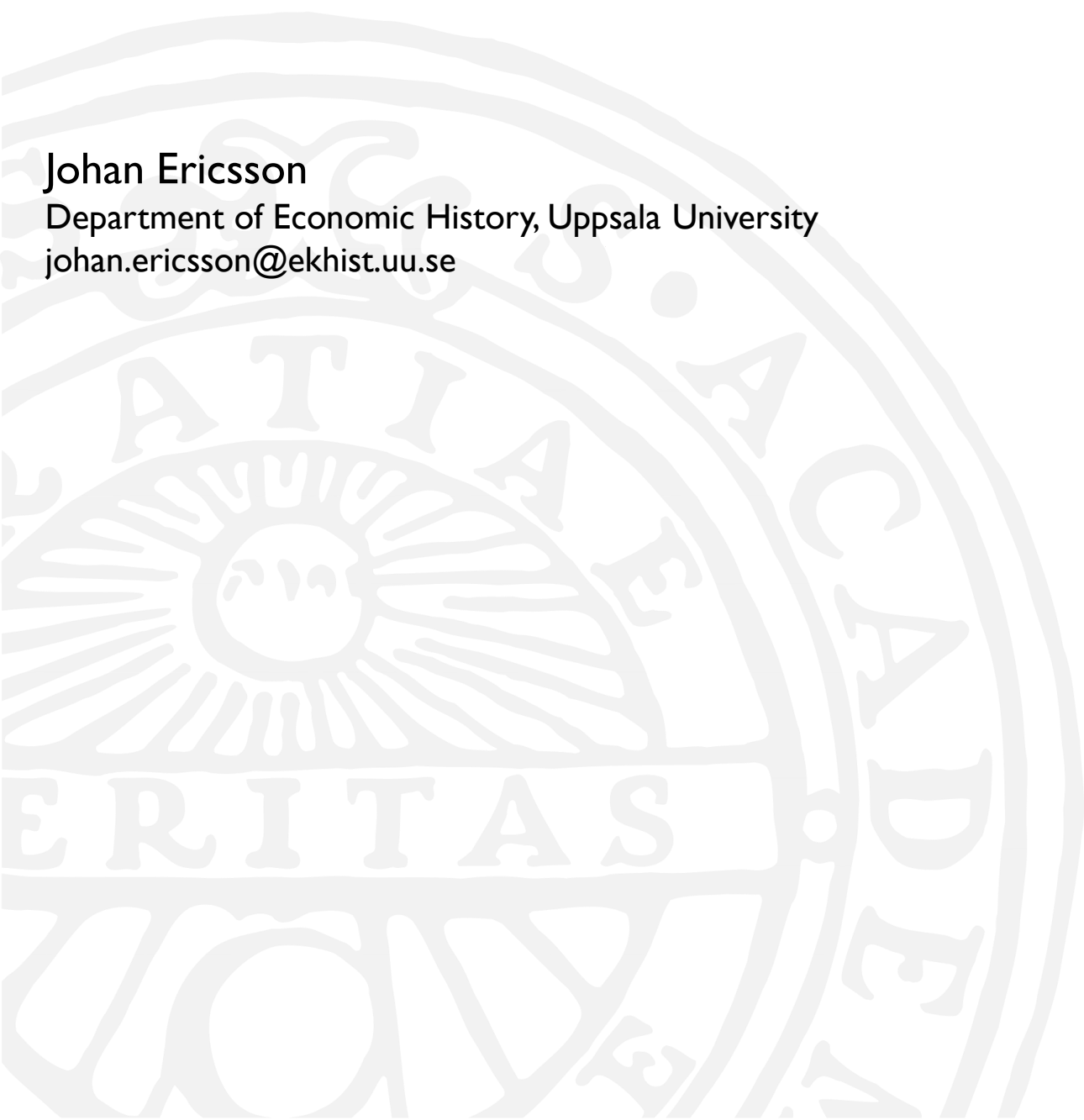
Working Paper 2024/16

Worst in Europe? Swedish Housing Conditions in the First Half of the 20th century

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Uppsala Papers in Economic History (UPEH), ISSN 2004-5263

Working Paper 2024/16

DOI: 10.33063/upeh.v3i.606

Date: 29 February 2024

Abstract

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Keywords: housing conditions, overcrowding, amenities

JEL: N00, N30, N34, O18

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Worst in Europe? Swedish Housing Conditions in the First Half of the 20th century

Johan Ericsson*

Abstract: Prevailing narratives in the historical literature often paint a picture of Sweden having some of the poorest housing conditions in Europe during the early 20th century. This article challenges this widely accepted view by presenting a first-of-its-kind systematic and comparative study of European housing conditions, with a focus on Sweden. By constructing a new database and critically examining existing data, this study seeks to reassess the common assertions about Swedish housing standards. This study shows that there is no empirical evidence to support the notion that Sweden had among the worst housing conditions in Europe in this period.

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Introduction

One of the consequences of the rapid urbanization of the 19th century was that the supply of housing almost everywhere failed to keep pace with demand. In cities all over Europe, the housing problem became a social question of the highest order. Rapid urbanization together with a dismantling of traditional social safety nets meant that housing now started becoming a political concern. As a result, social reformers and public authorities began to chart the extent of inadequate housing, in terms of both quantity and quality, and the public started getting involved in housing provision. This process started in countries such as England and France where urbanization and industrialization had progressed furthest, and spread subsequently to other parts of Europe, including Sweden.

As one of the great issues of the time, the housing question has received its fair share of attention from historians. Most consideration has perhaps been given to housing policies, but the question of housing conditions and housing standards has also frequently been part of the research agenda.¹ A ubiquitous finding is that housing conditions especially for the working class were at times extremely poor, but efforts to quantify the extent of housing deprivation are relatively rare. It is nonetheless quite common to claim that some localities had the worst housing conditions in Europe. This appears to be especially common in the Swedish literature. In fact, one might get the impression that Sweden having the worst, or one of the worst, housing conditions in Europe sometime at the start of the 20th century is one of the more well-established facts in Swedish historiography. It is not only in the historical literature that this apparent fact figures, but it has also spread to a more general discourse. There are however no comparative studies that can back up this claim. In this article I construct a new database on historical housing conditions for Europe in the first half of the 20th century which is the most comprehensive of its kind to date. The database is used to

¹ Burnett 1986; Dauntton 1990; Shapiro 1985; Pooley 1992.

critically examine both the claim that Sweden had the worst, or one of the worst housing standards in Europe at the time as well as the validity of one of the most common indicators of housing conditions, persons per room. The results show that there are no grounds to the assertion Swedish housing conditions were among the worst in Europe. They also show that the relative ranking of housing conditions can vary depending on the indicators used.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, I discuss the literature on Swedish housing conditions, followed by the literature on comparative historical housing statistics in general. Next, I discuss the issues associated with measuring housing conditions, the data used, and how the data is used to answer the research questions. After that, I present the results, starting with measures of crowding, followed by dwelling sizes and finally access to amenities.

Historical housing conditions

In the literature on Swedish housing conditions, there is a widespread notion that Sweden performed very poorly in comparative perspective during the first part of the 20th century. There is however no agreement on exactly how poor or the specific period for when this was the case. Nylander claims that Sweden had among the worst housing conditions in Europe until the 1930s.² According to Gullberg, Stockholm suffered from “perhaps the worst housing and general hygienic conditions among European capitals” at the turn of the 19th century.³ Björkman writes that Swedish housing standards were “exceptionally low” and that the “housing situation” in Sweden was worse than in the majority of European countries around 1900.⁴ Bjur Linde et al thinks that housing conditions were among the lowest in Europe up

² Nylander 2018, p. 73.

³ Gullberg 2001, p. 13.

⁴ Björkman 2012, p. 478; Björkman 2013, p. 529.

until the 1950s.⁵ In Rudbergs account, crowding in Sweden was worse than in most other European countries whereas Strömberg claim that Swedish housing was worse and more expensive than other industrialized countries in Europe in the 1910s.⁶ Dickens et al arrive at the same conclusion regarding rent and quality, but insist that it lasted up until the 1930s.⁷ Hirdman also compares Sweden with the industrialised countries of Europe, arguing that Swedish housing in the early 1930s was "considerably worse" than the others.⁸ Franzén in turn thinks that conditions in Sweden were "perhaps" the second worst in Western Europe in the 1930s.⁹

As this makes clear, there is a seemingly unanimous consensus that housing standards were very poor by European standards. Indeed, I haven't seen any suggestions in the literature that this was not the case. However, the lack of consensus on when this was the case, or where Sweden was on the scale, stems from the fact that none of the publications mentioned above have actually carried out comparative studies of housing conditions. Many of them don't even give a reference to support their claims, and in the cases where they do, the references don't provide any systematic and comparative research either. Unlike many other claims in the historical literature, this apparent fact has also spread far beyond the academic literature, and variants of the claim can be found in texts from right-wing think tanks, museums, cooperative housing movements, county councils and op-eds.

Exactly where this notion comes from is not entirely clear. The only study that has published data on the development of housing conditions in Sweden makes no comparisons with other countries.¹⁰ Several of the authors suggest that it was the Swedish housing surveys that revealed the poor state of Swedish housing, but while the surveys did point out that many

⁵ Linde Bjur et al. 2001, p. XXV.

⁶ Rudberg 1987, p. 10; Strömberg 1992, p. 242.

⁷ Dickens et al 1985, p. 49.

⁸ Hirdman 1989, p. 93.

⁹ Franzén 1996.

¹⁰ Ekbrant 1981.

dwellings in Sweden were overcrowded, damp, cold and lacked amenities, they didn't say that Sweden had the worst housing conditions in Europe. Some of the surveys collected data for other European countries as well, but they only made explicit statistical comparisons with the Nordic countries and some German cities. Their conclusions were also not as negative as one might conclude from reading later research. First, they argued that Nordic housing traditions made comparisons in terms of persons per room or similar measures very uncertain because they differed from traditions in other European countries. While it was common in England and Belgium to have many small rooms, the Nordic countries tended to build homes with few but large rooms. In one of the surveys, they compared available space in dwellings for certain Swedish cities with a German city that had been singled out for having unusually high housing standards and came to the conclusion that, while the German city had larger dwellings, conditions in Sweden weren't that far behind and that the housing situation in Sweden for the working class appeared to be roughly similar to what it was like in other countries in Europe.¹¹ Due to the lack of extensive and explicit comparisons, it is however difficult to use these publications to assess the merits of the claims. Another source that has been cited is a 1924 investigation conducted by the International Labour Organization. According to Dickens et al, it revealed that "Sweden had the highest rents for the lowest quality in industrial Europe".¹² The publication in question reveals no such thing however since it doesn't compare the quality of housing among the included countries.¹³

In addition to the literature on Swedish housing conditions, this article also contributes to a wider European research tradition. Housing conditions have been a point of interest for researchers and policy makers for a long time. The historical literature on housing is substantial, both that which is concerned with specific cities or countries and those that

¹¹ Socialstyrelsen 1920, p. 152; Socialstyrelsen 1928, p. 218.

¹² Dickens et al 1985, p. 49.

¹³ ILO 1924.

take a comparative stance.¹⁴ The historical literature on comparative housing standards has rarely, if ever, focused on compiling statistical information, however. Where statistics are used, they are mostly limited to shorter periods and few points of comparison. The research that has focused on single countries have more often collected information for longer periods of time.¹⁵ This is not to say that compilations of comparative housing conditions have never been published before. The most comprehensive dataset for the first half of the 20th century is Flora et al.¹⁶ Since their work focus on Western Europe, all Eastern European, but also some Western European, countries are excluded. Another collection of housing conditions that has often been used is a report by the United Nations covering the years 1939 and 1945.¹⁷ It includes somewhat different countries and years compared to Flora et al. The UN data for Sweden however refers only to rooms excluding kitchens, which makes the Swedish crowding statistics inflated. This has not been noted by others who have used the data, such as Deaton, with the result that Swedish housing conditions in some publications looks worse than it was.¹⁸

In this article I contribute with the first systematic and comparative study of housing conditions in Sweden. As is clear from the literature review, the notion of the inferiority of housing in Sweden is widespread both within and outside of academia and plays an important part in the narrative of the development of modern Sweden. Up until now no one has critically examined this claim.

¹⁴ See e.g. Daunton 1990; Lenger 2012.

¹⁵ Ekbrant 1981; Holmans 2005; Cahen 1957.

¹⁶ Flora 1987.

¹⁷ United Nations 1949.

¹⁸ Deaton 1976.

Measuring housing conditions

In the literature that deals with Swedish housing there is often a lack of clarity not only when it comes to the magnitude and timing of the poor Swedish conditions but also conceptually. A range of different terms are used, for example *bostadsstandard*, *utrymmesstandard*, *trångboddhet*. These terms can be translated as housing standards, space standards and overcrowding. However, it is not clear what the authors mean by these terms because they don't specify what they're referring to. This might seem like a trivial point; in a sense it's obvious what they mean. This is however not necessarily the case. Housing conditions is a multifaceted concept and can include at least four dimensions: (1) overcrowding, (2) amenities such as sanitation and electricity, (3) the physical condition of the dwelling, including whether it's draughty or mouldy, and (4) affordability. This makes it challenging to measure. Which dimensions should be included, how should they be measured and how, if at all, should they be weighted? These questions have occupied researchers and policy makers for over a century, and there are now international guidelines which national statistical agencies can consult when constructing housing censuses to make statistics comparable.¹⁹ Measuring historical housing conditions is even more demanding both because there is often a lack of data, where some countries started conducting housing surveys comparatively late, and the countries where they did take place did not have a shared conception of what was to be measured.

The most common metric in historical studies of housing conditions is overcrowding. This can be measured in different ways. One approach is to use persons per building. While this can be suitable in some circumstances, for example as an indication of the density of people in a geographical area, it is less suitable as an indication of comparative housing

¹⁹ See e.g. Eurostat 2019.

conditions.²⁰ Another is to use the number of persons per room (PPR). This can be done in several ways. Early housing censuses were interested in the distribution of housing conditions and reported overcrowding as the share of people living in dwellings where the number of persons per room was higher than a certain level which could differ between countries and over time. Different countries also had different approaches to the collection of material for the housing censuses. In France and in Britain, it was included in the regular census which meant that coverage was near complete but with the drawback that the amount of information that could be collected was more limited. In Germany, housing censuses were initially conducted locally by cities and were often much more thorough. In some places information was collected not only about the number of rooms but also the size of the rooms. This means that for some locations in Germany and Switzerland, there is very detailed information about at least a subset of dwellings, but there might not be any information about aggregate levels for the country.²¹ Much of the information about housing conditions comes from national or local housing censuses. Starting in the interwar period, the International Labour Organization began collecting information about workers' dwellings. These surveys are restricted to specific cities and a subset of the population, but they also include information about the size of and utilities available in dwellings for places where there might not otherwise exist any surveys.²²

The approach I take here is that I include all European countries for which I can find data. First, I compare crowding measured by PPR for all countries available over time. I build on the existing literature by merging existing datasets covering different periods, correcting faulty information, and adding new data from housing censuses. For some countries and years this has meant calculating the PPR when this data was not explicitly reported in the

²⁰ Chapman 2024, appendix B2.

²¹ Socialstyrelsen 1910.

²² ILO, 1936.

housing censuses. I expand the datasets by adding data for Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, Portugal, Estonia, Poland, the Soviet Union, and Latvia. Unfortunately, many countries lack national housing censuses for the first decades of the century. A further contribution is that I include data for cities as well since for some countries that did not have national housing censuses there were local surveys for certain cities. This approach allows me to extend the analysis to include locations that would otherwise have been excluded had I focused only on national levels. To include more points of reference, I therefore compare PPR levels for capitals ca 1910, which allows me to include more locations even if the crowding levels in capitals might not be perfectly correlated with overall crowding.

I have not made any corrections to the reported number of rooms to account for the different definitions of rooms that were used in different countries. This choice is based both on the fact that it is often difficult or impossible to get the information needed for this type of correction and that it is to some extent also indicative of how the rooms were actually used in different countries. In countries where kitchens were used for more than cooking, they tended to be counted as rooms whereas in countries where kitchens were smaller and used primarily for cooking, they tended to not be included. While the choice to not correct the numbers and exclude for example kitchens from rooms could lead the results to be somewhat biased, the alternative would also lead to strange results because that would mean that dwellings that consisted of only one room including kitchen would be counted as having no rooms at all.

While earlier research has tended to focus on crowding in terms of PPR, I go beyond that and include information about living space as well. Here I use the Swedish housing census of 1912–14 which includes information about the area and cubic space of the rooms of smaller apartments in a few Swedish cities. This information is used to assess how well different measures of crowding align. In the early Swedish housing censuses, it was claimed that Swedish rooms tended to be large, but the relationship between room size and number of

rooms was not systematically explored. Since Sweden was one of few countries where this type of information was presented in the census reports, I look at the correlation between PPR and space within Sweden to examine the correlation between the two indicators. To be able to compare the sizes of dwellings I use the ILO survey of workers dwellings in Europe in 1934–1935 which also contain information about PPR and space. While this survey only includes information about one strata of society and is less systematic and reliable than national censuses, it still gives an indication about the situation in different places.

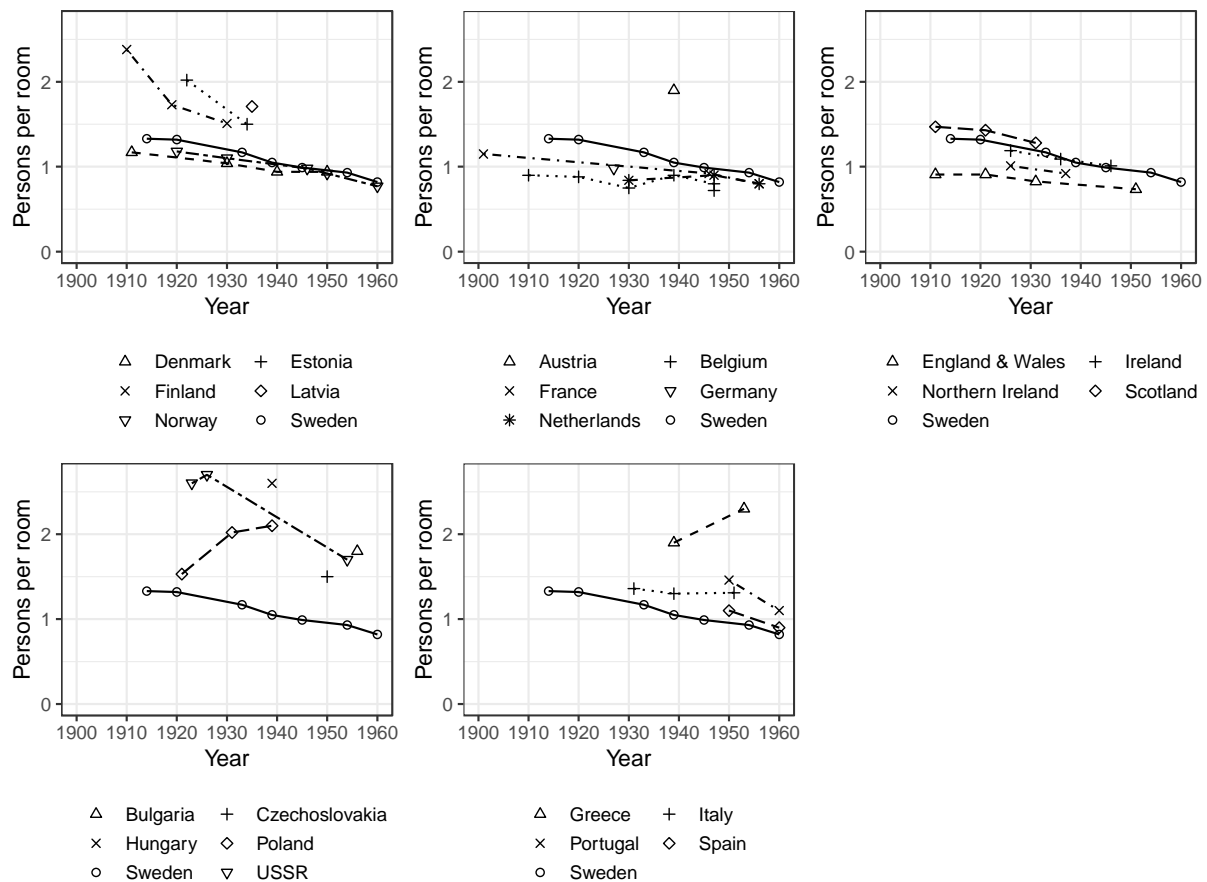
Finally, I consider amenities. Like floor space, this is information that wasn't included in most housing censuses. I compare the levels for Sweden with those places and years for which there is information from housing censuses and here I also use information from the ILO survey. In this case, the data is even more problematic to use since some places only provided very rough estimates of the availability of amenities. This issue is further elaborated in the section on amenities.

As this description of the data has made clear, comparing historical housing conditions is an endeavour which can only provide approximate answers. The results should therefore be interpreted with great care, something which was also stressed in Swedish housing census reports. For the aims of this paper, the issues with the data are less problematic. First, one of the purposes is to critically examine the indicators of housing conditions that are available. If all the indicators point in the same direction and if they indicate similar relative levels, they are less problematic to use. Second, since the other purpose is to evaluate the claims in the literature about relative Swedish housing conditions, I don't necessarily have to measure conditions precisely, I only need to assess if the data that is available supports the proposition that conditions in Sweden were among the worst.

Rooms

Figure 1 shows the average number of people per room for all European countries for which I have found information for the period 1900 to 1960. The numbers are not entirely comparable due to the different census or survey methods that were employed in different countries. For some countries, the entire population is included whereas for others it is only cities with a population over a certain number, or only the biggest cities. Others still include all types of settlements but only a sample of the total population. These numbers should therefore be interpreted with extreme care. They are however the best evidence we have at the national level. I have chosen to extend the period to 1960 to be able to include more countries. Even if we don't know the numbers for the first half of the century, their subsequent levels might give an indication of what is reasonable to assume. Given these caveats, figure 1 shows that there is no evidence that Sweden had the worst housing conditions in Europe at any point in the 20th century, if by housing conditions we mean the average number of people per room. Some of the more modest claims in the literature hold up better. Compared to what we can call Western Europe, represented by panel two and three, Sweden had the highest PPR of the countries for which there is data for the first three decades of the century. For Austria the first year for which I have data is 1939 and then the level was much higher than for Sweden. It is not unreasonable to think that this was the case also before that date. The numbers for Austria are however probably inflated due to how rooms were counted there. For the United Kingdom there are no aggregated statistics because the censuses were performed separately for the countries within the kingdom. It is also not possible to combine them because the censuses were performed in different years.

Figure 1: Crowding in European countries, ca 1900–1960



Sources: See appendix

Compared to England and Wales, Swedish PPR levels were quite a lot higher. They were lower than for Scotland and similar to Northern Ireland. Ireland had somewhat lower levels than Sweden in the 1920s and 1930s. Compared to the Northern countries, which here also include Estonia and Latvia, Sweden was in the middle, clearly lower than Finland, Estonia, and Latvia and slightly higher than Denmark and Norway.

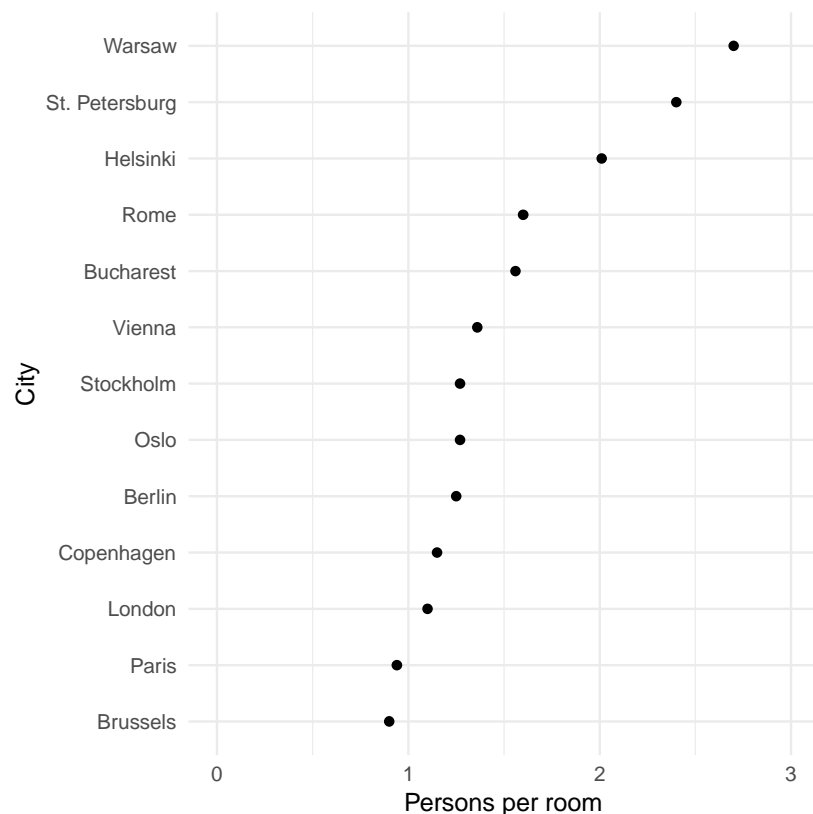
If we instead compare Sweden to Eastern and Southern Europe, Sweden had lower levels than all the countries that are included here. For many of them, there is only information for the later part of the period however, but most of them are so much higher that it would be unlikely that they had lower levels of PPR than Sweden for the earlier decades.

Possible exceptions to this are Spain and perhaps Italy. More important for the aim of this article is that there is no evidence that they had lower levels than Sweden.

Since there is a limited number of countries for which there is data for the first decades and because there are claims about Stockholm having perhaps the worst housing situation among European capitals at the turn of the century, I have also collected data for capitals ca 1910.

Figure 2 shows a similar picture, with Stockholm behind capitals of richer and more industrialised countries such as Brussels, Paris, and London, somewhat higher than Copenhagen, but very close to Oslo and Berlin. Capitals of countries further east had higher or much higher levels of PPR, as did Rome.

Figure 2: Crowding in European capitals, ca 1910



Sources: Stockholms stad. Statistiska kontoret 1912, p. 235; Kholodilin 2016; Feldbauer 1979; *Socialstyrelsen 1920; 1924*; Eberstadt 1920; Lampe 1983; Cahen 1957; Société des Nations, 1936; Strzelecki, 1936.

Looking at housing conditions as measured by PPR, and given the caveats about comparability, we can see that there is some support for the more moderate claims about the deficiency of Swedish housing. PPR levels were higher, and conditions thus worse, than in most Western countries. If we by industrialised countries mean broadly the same countries, the result of course also holds for that. It should however be noted that the levels in Sweden were not much dissimilar from Norway and Denmark even if they were higher. The results also depend somewhat on how the United Kingdom is treated. The more excessive claims about Sweden being among the worst in Europe when it comes to housing clearly have no basis in the data. Even if we lack information for the first decades for many countries from Eastern and Southern Europe, subsequent levels indicate that conditions there were worse than in Sweden, and in any case, there is nothing to suggest that they were better.

Space

Using PPR for comparative studies of housing conditions is useful in many ways, both because the metric captures some important dimensions of housing that we tend to care about, and because it is often possible to find information about it. It is also a limited metric. For as long as housing censuses and surveys have been conducted, there has been an awareness of the problems and pitfalls of equating the number of rooms per person with housing conditions. One important objection is that there appeared to be culturally influenced patterns in how dwellings were planned that differed between countries. The Nordic countries tended to have few but large rooms whereas in for example England, rooms were smaller but more plentiful. A report on housing standards published in Great Britain in 1918 with proposals of minimum requirements suggested that average room sizes should be between 10 and 12 square metres.²³ This can be contrasted with the size of a sample of smaller dwellings

²³ Great Britain. Local Government Board. Committee on Building Construction 1918.

in a few Swedish cities in the years just before the first World War. In Sundsvall, kitchens had on average a size of 15.8 square metres and other rooms 17.7 square metres, with an average of 16.7 square metres. In Jönköping, rooms were somewhat smaller. The average room had a size of 15, kitchens 13.1 and other rooms 16.5 square metres.²⁴ The proposed English dwelling was certainly still much larger than those where Swedish workers lived, with a total space of between ca 54 and 66 square metres whereas the average size of apartments in Sundsvall was 30.6 square metres. Nonetheless, this indicates that focusing solely on PPR biases the results in favour of Britain in this case. The average three room apartment (including kitchen) in Sundsvall was 51.6 square metres, which is almost as large as the proposed three-bedroom British house when including scullery and larder. Using the same definition of rooms as in Sweden that would be a five-room apartment. If we use these two types of dwellings to compare space per person, a family of five in the British dwelling would have 1 person per room and in Sundsvall it would have 1.7 persons per room. The British family would have 10.7 square metres and the Swedish family would have 10.3 square metres per person, thus resulting in very similar levels. This is not to say that Swedish housing conditions were the same as in Britain. We don't know the sizes of actual dwellings in Britain, and we only know it for a small sample of dwellings in Sweden which is skewed towards the smaller apartments. Among those, the three-room Sundsvall apartment is the largest type of dwelling included.

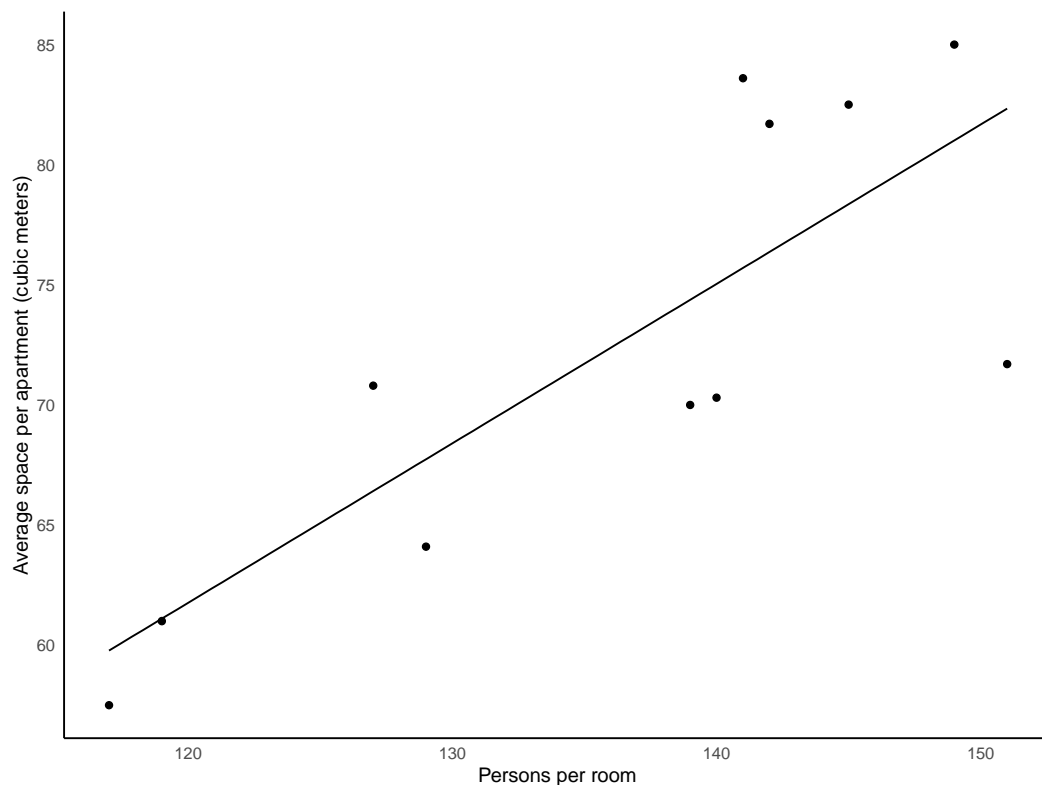
Nevertheless, this suggests that it might be an idea to measure the living space available per person in terms of square metres, which is sometimes also called floor space, or even cubic metres, in addition to number of rooms. The problem with this approach is that there is considerably less information about floor space than there is about number of rooms because it was so much more labour intensive to collect this information. There is however

²⁴ Socialstyrelsen 1914; 1916.

some information that we can use. In this section, I first use the Swedish housing census of 1912/14 where there is information about PPR and other measures of space for a sample of smaller apartments in a subset of cities. I use this to examine the relationship between overcrowding in terms of PPR and the dwelling volume. I then turn to a survey of worker's housing conditions conducted by the International Labour Organization in the 1930s. They requested information about housing conditions in certain cities for a number of European countries and Canada from the cities themselves. The data includes information about the size of dwellings in terms of rooms but also floor space as well as access to amenities, among other things. Some cities performed separate investigations for this specific survey, some used information that was already available and some used information from experts who provided educated guesses or estimates about the size of apartments. This certainly makes comparability somewhat limited, but it is also the best and most comprehensive source for this type of information that is available for such a larger number of cities for this period.

The Swedish housing census of 1912/14 shows that there were large variations within Sweden both in terms of PPR but also in the size of rooms. For twelve Swedish cities, there is information about both the number of rooms per dwelling and about dwelling space. This information was however not initially collected as part of the national census, but instead by the cities themselves with the result that they did not follow the exact same procedure. This means that the information varies for the cities. All of them report total dwelling size, but some of them don't report space per person and some report space per person unit, which is a way to adjust for the structure of households, whereas some don't.

Figure 3: Dwelling space and PPR in Swedish cities, ca 1910

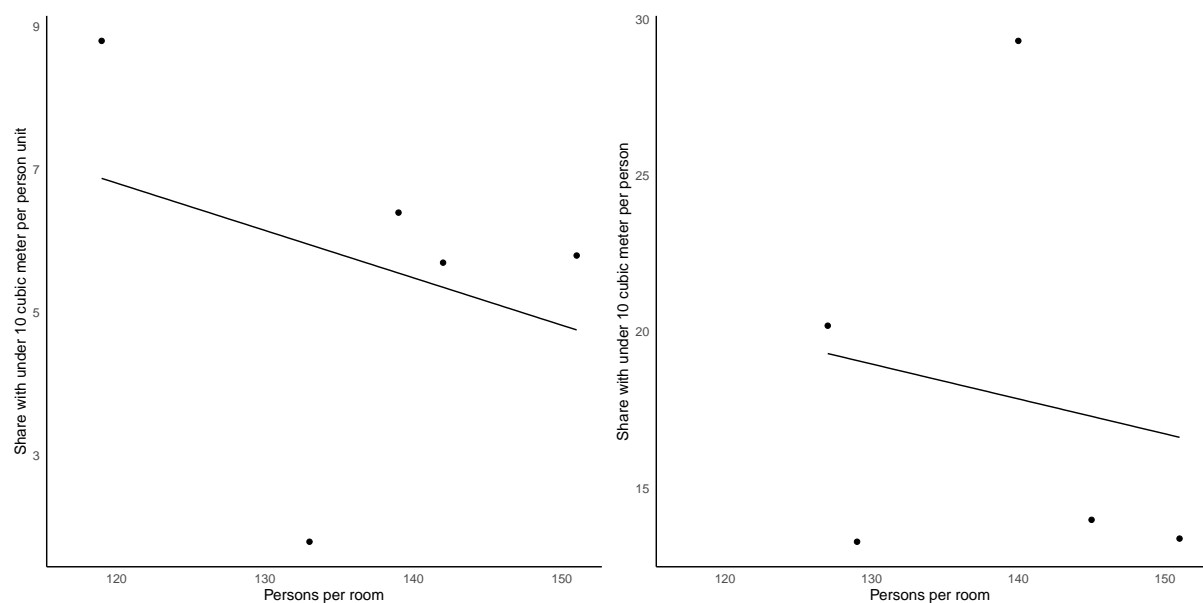


Source: Socialstyrelsen 1920.

Figure 3 shows the relationship between average PPR and average dwelling volume in terms of cubic metres. It shows that there is a strong positive relationship between these two variables, so that cities with more crowding in terms of PPR also had larger dwellings in terms of volume. Where dwellings had more space, people tended to make do with fewer rooms. This could indicate that it was not only the number of rooms that mattered and that having fewer rooms per person was not as problematic if the rooms were large enough.

Breaking down these numbers to show how much space each person had at their disposal also indicates that having access to fewer rooms was compensated by having more space for each person. The ranking of which cities were more crowded would thus look very different depending on if we use PPR or volume per person.

Figure 4: Crowding measured by space vs PPR, Swedish cities ca 1910



Source: Socialstyrelsen 1920.

The census doesn't report the average volume per person, but only the share who had less than ten cubic metres at their disposal, either per person or per person unit. Figure 4 shows that there was a negative relationship between PPR and these two measures, but since there are so few observations the correlation is not very strong. Having more people per room did not tend to mean that the space for each person was any smaller, but if anything, the opposite was more likely.

The evidence presented here casts doubt on the usefulness of PPR as a metric for crowding, but it only deals with conditions within Sweden. Using the information from the ILO survey indicates that if we take this into account, Swedish housing conditions were better than indicated by PPR. The data covers 16 cities in total from Sweden, England, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland.

Scatter plot showing the relationship between the number of rooms (X-axis) and the total area (Y-axis) for various hotels. The X-axis ranges from 1 to 6, and the Y-axis ranges from 25 to 100. Data points are labeled with city names. A vertical line is drawn at Rooms = 3, and a horizontal line is drawn at Total area = 50.

City	Rooms	Total area
Warsaw	1	15
Trieste	1	20
Genoa	1	20
Paris	2	15
Florence	2	22
Lyons	2	25
Genoa	2	30
Warsaw	2	30
Trieste	2	32
Milan	2	35
Stockholm	2	40
Stockholm	3	35
Genoa	3	42
Florence	3	45
Trieste	3	45
Lyons	3	35
Paris	3	25
Stockholm	3	58
Stockholm	3	60
Genoa	4	48
Birmingham	4	48
Manchester	4	48
Leeds	4	50
Genoa	4	55
Florence	4	55
Turin	4	58
Trieste	4	60
Basle	4	65
Milan	4	70
Paris	4	32
Manchester	5	55
London	5	58
Birmingham	5	60
Leeds	5	65
Genoa	5	68
Florence	5	70
Turin	5	75
Trieste	5	78
Lille	6	85
Genoa	6	90
Trieste	6	100

Note: For Stockholm the size is given as an interval.

19

year 1935 show that conditions in Stockholm were not anomalous. The median size of a two-room apartment was 32.6 square metres and of three-room apartment it was 49.6 square metres for all fourteen cities. The median for each dwelling type could vary between cities, from 28.5 square metres in Uppsala to 37.1 square metres in Örebro for a dwelling with two rooms, and between 43 square metres in Kristianstad to 58.8 square metres in Örebro for three rooms.²⁵

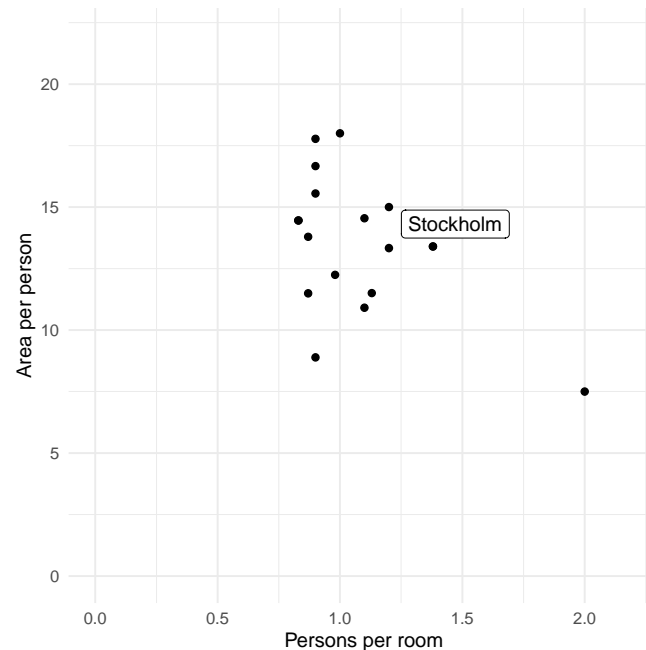
Overall, Swedish dwellings had large living areas for their size, even if the total areas were still in middle and bottom half of the distribution. It is important to remember however that the figure only shows the size of apartments that were prevalent among the working class, not the average size of dwellings for cities.

Figure 5 also doesn't take into consideration the size of the families that occupied the dwellings, so it doesn't say much about crowding. The report does however provide information about the average area per room and the average number of persons per room. With this information I can calculate the average area per person by taking the former divided by the latter. The results are presented in figure 6 where I have plotted area per person against persons per room. Unlike for within Sweden, there doesn't seem to be a general relationship between PPR and space. While cities with high PPR were less crowded in terms of space in Sweden, that does not apply to the selection of cities here. For Sweden however, it matters which metric is chosen. Going by PPR, Swedish workers would have had the second worst housing conditions among the cities in this sample, but if we instead look at area per person, they rank as 10 out of 17, above London and not far behind Manchester. This can be contrasted with PPR where the English cities were performing much better. In fact, at the national level, England and Wales had some of the best housing conditions in Europe measured by PPR.

²⁵ Socialstyrelsen, 1936.

One should not read too much into this data due to the unsystematic and somewhat opaque process by which it has been produced. The Italian dwellings for example appear to be very large and the PPR seem low compared to the national levels. It is not reasonable that worker dwellings were larger than for the general population in cities.

Figure 6: Area per person and persons per room for workers in certain European cities, 1930s



Source: *Worker's Dwellings in Certain Towns*, 1936.

Due to the nature of the survey, it is also difficult to know how much the larger Swedish rooms would affect the ranking of Sweden overall. We lack data on this for many countries, and there was also considerable heterogeneity within countries, so we can't extrapolate to the national level. Since the data is also limited to the working class, we can't say how this would affect estimates for the entire population. So even if Stockholm according to this survey performed on a level similar to cities in the country which is sometimes seen as having the best housing conditions during this period, we shouldn't draw the conclusion that Sweden was among the top performers in Europe. Even so, this exercise indicates that Swedish housing conditions were even less behind the more advanced countries in the 1930s

if we take into account the size of the rooms and not only the number of rooms. One additional comparison can be made. For the Soviet Union, there is information about average floor space per person. In 1928, it was 5.9 for the whole population. Workers in towns only had 4.9 square metres per person however, while salaried employees had 7.65 square metres. There were differences between cities as well, with Leningrad reaching 8.7 square metres compared to 5.7 in Moscow. Compared to conditions in Eastern Europe, Sweden was clearly ahead.²⁶

In this section, I have shown that in Sweden, places with higher PPR also tended to have larger dwellings and even more space per person. At an international level, this does not appear to hold, but Swedish dwellings were large when controlling for number of rooms, and if crowding is measured as the area per person housing in Sweden was much better off than if using persons per room. This finding reinforces the conclusions from the previous section, and even if the evidence is limited, it supports the notions in early Swedish housing censuses that Swedish rooms tended to be large and when controlling for that, housing conditions in Sweden were perhaps not much dissimilar to many other Western countries.

Amenities

Crowding is only one aspect of housing conditions, and perhaps not even the most important. Access to amenities such as running water, drains, bathrooms, and electricity was also a vital component of the standard of housing and of living. This type of information has proved to be even more difficult to come by. In Sweden, information on amenities is available in all national censuses, but the amenities included have changed over time. In the first census from 1912-14, there is information about the share of dwellings with water, entrance hall, food cellar, scullery, drains, access to a laundry room, and access to privies. In the 1920 iteration,

²⁶ Mequet, 1932, p. 624–625.

the categories are instead entrance hall, bath- or shower room, central heating, cooking gas, and electrical light. It is accordingly difficult to find consistent statistics even within countries.

It is however possible to make some comparisons which, while limited, are still quite illuminating. First, the share of dwellings in cities and smaller towns in Sweden which had water installed was 61,5 percent in 1912–1914.²⁷ Since few other places collected this type of information this early, we can instead compare the number to the situation in some other countries a few decades later. A UN publication from 1956 includes data on access to inside running water in urban areas for 13 countries for the period after the Second World War. Access to running water in Swedish cities and towns at the outbreak of the First World War was higher than in five of those. The countries that had lower shares in the 1940s and 1950s than Sweden in the 1910s were France in 1946 (56 percent), Austria in 1951 (45 percent), Yugoslavia in 1950 (26 percent), Czechoslovakia in 1946 (56 percent) and Hungary in 1954 (48 percent).²⁸ The Latvian census for 1935 also included this information. There, 37,3 percent of dwellings had water. Half of the dwellings had access to water pipes if we include those who shared the pipe with other dwellings. The rest either relied on pumps, wells or had no water at all.²⁹

In Estonia, the census from 1934 doesn't include information about share of dwellings with water, but it does include information about bathrooms which six percent of dwellings in cities and towns had. In Sweden, the share for the nearest year, which is 1933, is 18 percent. 64 percent of Estonian dwellings had electric lighting whereas the share in Sweden was 84 percent of dwellings already at the time of the 1920 housing census.³⁰

²⁷ Socialstyrelsen 1920, table K.

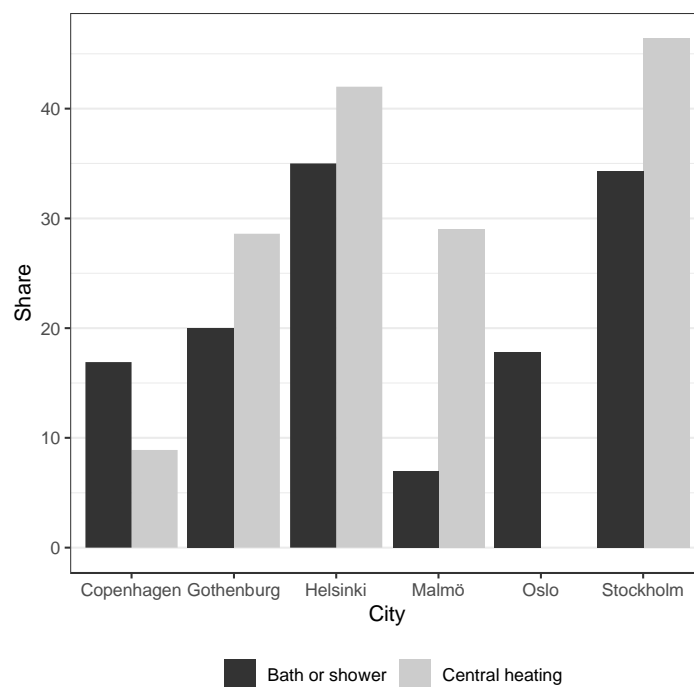
²⁸ United Nations 1956, p. 48.

²⁹ Latvija Valsts statistiska parvalde 1936, p. 137.

³⁰ Riigi statistika keskbüroo 1935, tab. 17; Socialstyrelsen 1936.

If we turn to the Nordic countries instead, only Sweden collected systematic information about amenities before the 1930s. After that, there is information for Denmark and Finland as well. In 1930 on average 14 percent of apartments had a bath or shower room in Denmark and in Finland 17 percent of dwellings had bathrooms, compared to the Swedish 18 percent.³¹ Denmark on the other hand had a higher share of dwellings with WC. For some reason there is no information about this for Stockholm, so the numbers are a bit more difficult to compare. In all of Denmark, 57 percent of dwellings had WC. In Sweden less Stockholm, the share was 32 percent. Excluding Copenhagen from the Danish data brings the share down to 48 percent, which is closer but still considerably higher than Sweden. In Finland, 38 percent of dwellings in the cities which were included in the census had WC. Excluding Helsinki however lowers the share to 21 percent.

Figure 7: Amenities in larger Nordic cities, ca 1934



Source: Stockholms stads fastighetskontor 1934.

³¹ Socialstyrelsen 1936; Danmarks statistik 1931, p. 166, table VII; Finland. Statistikcentralen 1933, p. 24. The Finnish census only included nine out of 38 cities and the number is therefore more influenced by the largest city than in Denmark which includes all municipalities.

If we restrict ourselves to capitals and focus on other types of amenities, it is possible to include Norway as well. The information was compiled by Stockholm city and include amenities as well as the size of apartments for the mentioned cities. Apart from the capitals, the second and third largest cities of Sweden, Gothenburg, and Malmö, are also included.

The information included about amenities is the proportion of apartments with bath or shower and the proportion with central heating but no WC. The share with central heating was highest in Stockholm, followed by Helsinki while Copenhagen had by far the lowest share.³²

It is debatable how much weight should be placed on central heating. It would probably indicate some degree of improvement since there would be less need for individual families to procure fuel. It is also possible that it was cheaper than other forms of heating. It was obviously seen as important enough to include in the housing censuses. It could perhaps be argued that the extent of central heating is dependent on climatic conditions, and that there would be a greater need in Stockholm and Helsinki than in Copenhagen because they are colder. Apartments in Malmö, which is located across the sound from Copenhagen, were much more likely to have central heating, so that can't be the only explanation. Looking at bath and showers instead leads to a somewhat different picture. Here Helsinki had the highest share, followed by Stockholm. Malmö had the lowest with less than ten percent. Oslo and Copenhagen at around 17 percent were slightly below Gothenburg where 20 percent of apartments had bath or shower.

The survey also included information about the proportion of dwellings according to number of rooms as well as the share of apartments that were considered overcrowded, measured as more than two people per room. Going by these indicators, apartments in the

³² The results for Helsinki differ from the 1930 census. The number for Helsinki is larger here. If this has to do with different timing of the census and these results, different definitions of bath- or shower rooms or city boundaries or something else is not possible to answer because the publication from Stockholm city doesn't contain any sources or information about how the information was gathered or processed.

Swedish cities and in Finland were generally smaller. In Copenhagen, 31 percent of apartments had more than three rooms and in Oslo this share was 25 percent compared to the other cities where between 12 and 14 percent were this large. Overcrowding did not strictly follow this pattern, however. In Stockholm, nine percent of apartments were overcrowded while in Oslo and Copenhagen this number was 11 percent. Gothenburg, Malmö, and Helsinki had higher overcrowding rates, 18, 13 and 24 percent respectively.³³

There was thus no clear correlation between overcrowding and the share of certain amenities. Helsinki had the smallest and most crowded apartments, but also the highest share of bath or shower rooms. The ranking of Helsinki among the Nordic capitals in terms of housing conditions would therefore be dependent on the weight which is put on each indicator. In terms of amenities, the largest cities in Sweden had similar or higher shares than the rest of the Nordic capitals in the early 1930s, and Sweden as a whole had a higher share than Denmark and almost exactly the same as the nine largest cities in Finland.

The survey conducted by the ILO about housing conditions for workers in certain towns also include information about amenities. The nature of the responses and the presentation of the results reduces the extent to which it is useful for our purposes, however. The content of the tables is reproduced in table 1. For some cities, the share of dwellings with water, gas, lavatory, and bathroom are presented with precise percentages. For others they are indicated with the letters, T, G, F, R, P and O, where T means total, G means general or about three quarters, F means frequent or between one quarter to three quarters, R means rare or less than a quarter. Sometimes even these very broad categories could not be applied so P could be used, standing for predominant, and O for occasional where P would be roughly similar to G or R and O might be similar to F and R. The data is also divided into buildings constructed before or after the First World War for certain cities and some only include

³³ Stockholms stads fastighetskontor 1934, p. 102–104.

information about houses constructed by public institutions such as local authorities. For Sweden, the data is presented with letters and divided between Stockholm and other towns as well as built before and after the war. This leads to ranges for bathrooms in Sweden between below 25 percent and up to 75 percent. For British cities, the information is also not very informative. All cities range between rare and general with less than a quarter for older houses but around three quarters for newer ones built by local councils. In Amsterdam, Netherlands, bathrooms were classified as rare. In Italy, bathrooms ranged between one and 12 percent whereas in Berne in Switzerland, 36 percent of worker's dwellings had them. In Basle, nine percent of old buildings had them but 68 percent of new ones. In Lyons, France, they were considered rare. Going by this rough classification, bathrooms appear to have been somewhat less common in Sweden than in Great Britain, more common than in Italy and Amsterdam and roughly as common as in Switzerland.

The prevalence of lavatories is even less specific for Sweden where lavatories in the building and lavatories in the dwelling are combined. In Stockholm lavatories were apparently found in general, and in other towns frequently. In Italian cities, lavatories in the building ranged between 21 and 96 percent, in British cities between frequent and total, in Amsterdam they were generally occurring. In Berne 83 percent and in Zurich 93 percent of dwellings had lavatories. In France, dwellings in general had lavatories, in Lyons half had them in dwellings and half in the building, and in Marseilles virtually all dwellings had lavatories. In Copenhagen lavatories either in the building or in the dwelling was frequent.

Table 1: Housing amenities in worker's dwellings in certain European cities, 1934–1935

Country	City	Construction	Water laid on	Gas	Electricity	Lavatory in the building	Lavatory in the dwelling	Bathroom
Denmark	Copenhagen	a+b	G	G	G		F	R
France	Lille	a	G	G			75	
	Lyons	a U	50	G	F	50	50	R
	Marseilles	a	T	R	R		T	
	Paris	a	60	80	80	P		
	Birmingham	a	T	T		R	G	R
Great Britain		b U	T	T	G		T	G
	Bristol	a	T	T			G	R
		b U	T	T	G		T	G
	Glasgow	a	T	T	R		G	R
		b U	T	T	G		T	G
	Leeds	a	T	T	R	F	F	R
	London	a	T	T	R		G	R
		b U	T	T	F		T	G
	Manchester	a	T	T			G	R
		b U	T	T	T		T	G
	Newcastle	a	T	T	R	F	F	R
		b U	T	T	F		T	G
Italy	Florence	a+b	71	12	98	72	28	3
	Genoa	a+b	98	59	81	4	96	12
	Milan	a+b	46	81	94	63	37	8
	Rome	a+b	78	23	80		83	8
	Trieste	a+b	64	47	75	79	21	1
	Turin	a+b	100	77	88	5	95	1
Netherlands	Amsterdam	a+b	T	T	T		G	R
Poland	Warsaw	a	22			8	11	
Sweden	Stockholm	a	G	G	G		G	R
		b	G	G	G		G	F
	Other towns	a	F	F	G		F	R
		b	F	F	G		F	F
Switzerland	Basle	a	T	G	G			9
		b	T	T	T			68
	Berne	a+b	100	G	G	17	83	36
	Zurich	a+b	T	G	T	7	93	

Notes: T = Total, G = General (~75%), F = Frequent (~25-75%), R = Rare (<~ 25%), P = Predominant (≈G or F), O = Occasional (≈F or R). a = dwellings constructed before the war, b = dwellings constructed after the war, U = dwellings constructed by public utility institutions.

Source: Adapted after *Workers' dwellings in certain towns 1936*.

For laid on water and electricity, Swedish cities had a range between frequent and general. All British dwellings had water whereas electricity ranged from rare to frequent. In Italy the range was between 46 and 100 percent coverage and in Amsterdam both electricity and water were universally found. Swiss cities ranged between general and total coverage whereas in Warsaw only 22 percent of dwellings had water.

As it was, there is more detailed information for Sweden from the 1933 housing census. According to that, 97 percent of dwellings in the 33 cities that were included in this segment of the census had electricity and the same number applies to smaller apartments.³⁴ It is unclear why the ILO survey indicates that the prevalence in all Swedish cities was roughly 75 percent. Lavatories are more difficult to assess. In all of Sweden excluding Stockholm, 32 percent of dwellings had WCs and in Gothenburg this number was almost 48 percent. For smaller apartments, the numbers were 25 and 40 percent. The Swedish census doesn't indicate where the WCs were located, however. For a smaller subset of cities and smaller apartments, 29 percent of apartments had WC, but only 22 percent had either water or dry closet inside the dwelling, and fully 62 percent of dwellings had their water or dry closets located outside the building. When it comes to laid on water, 25 percent of dwellings in Sweden did not have water and / or drains. The range was considerable however, from three to 90 percent among cities and towns. It bears reminding that the definition of city or town in Sweden was strictly legal and many were very small. Marstrand, where over 90 percent of smaller dwellings had no water is located on an island outside of Gothenburg and had less than 2 000 inhabitants. The unweighted average for the 15 largest cities excluding Stockholm was 17 percent which means that 83 percent of smaller dwellings had water and/ or drains connected, or in the parlance of ILO, somewhere in between general and total coverage.

³⁴ Socialstyrelsen 1936, p. 210, table 103.

If we combine the information from the ILO survey and that of the Swedish housing census, it appears that amenities in Sweden in some respects were on a relatively high level while especially the supply of lavatories appear to have been less satisfactory. This survey should again be taken with a large pinch of salt. Especially the Italian levels appear very high. On the other hand, they provide very precise numbers which indicates that they might actually have conducted investigations and not just had someone estimate the prevalence of different amenities. It should also be noted that the places included are some of the most developed in Europe. The only Eastern European city that responded was Warsaw where conditions were among the lowest. Again, the conclusion must be that there is no evidence that Sweden had the worst housing conditions in Europe. Instead, they appear to have been somewhere in the middle, lower than richer countries such as Britain and Switzerland, similar to the Nordic countries and higher than Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

It is very common claim in the Swedish literature about historical housing conditions that Sweden had the worst, or one of the worst housing situations in Europe in the first part of the 20th century. None of the authors have critically examined this claim, however. In this paper, I have compiled a new database with information about housing conditions in Europe, combining information from earlier research as well as from housing censuses and housing surveys. The results show that relative housing conditions partly depends on what metric is chosen. The most common indicator, persons per room, can differ considerably from other indicators, such as floor space per person or access to amenities. No matter which indicator is used, there is no indication that Sweden had the worst housing conditions in Europe at any point during the first half of the 20th century. Crowding levels as measured by persons per room was high compared to most developed countries in Western Europe, but lower than in

Southern and Eastern Europe. There is not enough evidence concerning floor space and amenities to draw any firm conclusions about national rankings, but if anything, incorporating these aspects would likely place Sweden in an even better position. One question that is raised by these results is how this myth, or perhaps factoid, has become so entrenched and widely spread. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine this question in detail, a few remarks can be made. First, it fits with larger success story of how Sweden went from being a poor agrarian country at the periphery of Europe in the 19th century, to being perhaps the richest country in the world in the 1970s. It also fits well with a narrative of how social democratic policies created the people's home with high living standards for everyone. A further factor which probably enabled the success of the story is the overwhelming impact of the radio program turned into book *Lort-Sverige* (lit. dirt-Sweden) (Nordström 1938). Nordström documented appalling housing conditions for agricultural contract workers, especially in southern Sweden, and the term lives on in Swedish collective memory. These factors might help explain why these claims have not been scrutinized before, they simply seemed reasonable. Another factor is probably a degree of carelessness. One partial explanation could be that some writers have conflated Western Europe with Europe. This could be due to imprecise recollections of what has actually been claimed. Based on the information from early housing censuses it is not unreasonable to come to the conclusion that Sweden had one of the worst housing conditions in Western Europe, or because they fail to consider that Eastern Europe is also part of Europe. Given the importance placed on source criticism within the profession, it is remarkable that these claims have been uncritically accepted and reiterated. These results also show that we need to reassess the dominant narrative on the development of housing in Sweden. Rather than a success story, where Sweden went from the worst to the best, Sweden started from a middle position. This aligns with recent results on the development of the Swedish economy in the 19th century which has

been reassessed by Hamark and Prado (2024), who argue that industrial growth rates were considerably lower than previously thought. Sweden thus appears to have been less of an outlier, both in terms of starting point and in terms of development. Subsequent improvements would therefore also seem less spectacular and instead to have followed a more general pattern. This suggests that it is perhaps warranted to pay more attention to explanatory factors that were common for a larger set of countries, rather than looking for what was unique in the Swedish case.

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