

# Young people in suburbs feel discriminated, but hopeful

## Abstract

Based on research in Swedish multi-ethnic areas, this paper examines discourses of unrest among youth in multi-ethnic, tower-block suburbs. While there is a focus on the mechanisms of racialized social exclusion among the youth, the preoccupation among local actors including social workers, police, principals and representatives of NGOs as is with the 'area of exclusion' itself as causing the problems of urban unrest. Such problematizing highlights broader policy changes in Sweden, where the main responsibility for welfare is put on the individual, rather than on the collective and the state.

*Keywords:* exclusion, youth, urban tensions

## Suburbs on fire

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to tensions and conflicts in the Swedish landscape of the tower-block suburbs. Media reports on youth uprising, burning cars and stones thrown at police and rescue vehicles have put the focus on urban peripheries and particularly on suburban youth as the subject of social disorder and disintegration (Stigendal 2016). Consequently, the urban peripheries and youth in the tower-block suburbs are formed as the subject of social change and social policy interventions.

These reports conflict with previous images of Sweden and Swedish welfare policy as successful regarding its universal outreach and arrangements aiming for equality, diversity and social inclusion (Schierup et al. 2014). In Sweden, as well as internationally, these problems of marginalization have recently given rise to intensified debates on the challenges or possible decline of multi-culturalism and need of strategies to promote integration and social solidarity. These conflicts are played out concerning fundamental transformations of Swedish welfare state policy, where welfarist governing from the social point of view has gradually been more and more influenced by neo-liberal rationalities (cf. Dahlstedt 2015). Since the 1990s, Swedish social policy is characterized by a shift from equality to freedom of choice, from redistribution to activation, from collective rights to individual responsibilities.

These shifts have had a range of consequences in terms of increasing social and eco-

conomic divisions and furthermore intensified polarization in Swedish cities (Schierup et al. 2014). Once more, public attention has been drawn to suburban tower-block areas previously known as part of the Million-program, a large-scale housing project initiated in the late 1960s as part of broader universal and state-centred welfare policies, providing rental apartments for the broad population. From the start, these urban areas of rental departments have been portrayed in terms of deviance and as sites of risk and social problems, tensions and conflicts. The areas have been described as Badlands of the People's home. In the 1970s there was a focus on class-related problems; in the 1980s and 1990s, the problem framing was changed into challenges of ethno-cultural difference and otherness (cf. Ristilammi 1993). In the beginning of the third millennium, these suburban areas and their residents were primarily characterized as 'areas of exclusion' (utanförskapsområden) tied to the political term of, 'the problem of the outside' (utanförskapsproblemet) (Dahlstedt 2015).

### Stories from the urban periphery

These discourses of social exclusion have been problematized in an on-going study on social exclusion of youth in the suburban tower-block landscape. In the study, a range of local actors have been interviewed – including social workers, police, principals and representatives of NGOs – as well as youth living in suburban tower-block areas in two cities where repeated tensions and conflicts involving youth have been taking place (cf. Dahlstedt & Lozic 2017; Dahlstedt & Frempong 2017).

Among the local actors, the focus is first and foremost put on the 'areas of exclusion' and its inhabitants, when it comes to thinking about the possible causes of the urban development unrest among youth. The problem is primarily understood in terms of the 'areas of exclusion' as populated by households with poor resources – particularly by unemployed and 'migrants' – described as lacking the skills necessary in order for the parents to take responsibility for the upbringing of their children. Based on such an understanding of the problem, there is a variety of measures proposed as a means to address the present situation – primarily aimed at the 'areas of exclusion' itself and its inhabitants.

For instance, the head of a school in one suburban tower-block area describe the parents and specifically their lack of commitment in relation to school as a significant challenge – in contrast to the situation described in other parts of the city.

We rarely manage to get parents to parent's meetings. The ones participating are the parents who have a job and have become included in society, and not all parents have. [...] Among the economically stronger groups, where there are more highly educated parents, [in these areas], schools are more questioned by parents. It is not always the best for the school to be questioned by the parents, but the parents in the [Area] are generally passive.

In this description, parents living in the suburban area are portrayed as different from parents residing in the more prosperous areas of the city – they are passive, not active and questioning as parents in other areas. The main line of argument, focusing on the passivity of the suburban parents, appears in an interview with a teacher working in a suburban school in another city, describing the situation at school as follows:

There is a lot of extreme violence among the students. We are talking about grade one and three... extensive violence among the younger students... a huge problem [...] The parents are not at home with the students nowadays, as they used to be. It's different with the parents who are involved. We call to a parent meeting and there are three parents showing up.

Once more, the focus is put on the suburban parents as a main challenge. Among the local actors, there is a recurring discourse of the migrant background of the parents as a particular challenge. For instance, one police officer speaks of 'migrant parents' as having a 'completely different mind-set about sentence than they have in so-called West', arguing that they think about Swedish society as 'indulging' and 'petting with people'. According to another police officer, there are significant differences between Swedish authority and these parents' views on both society and upbringing: 'if you are talking to a father here, he could hit a child', which according to him would not be possible in other parts of the city.

## Opposing exclusion

Among youth, there is a different understanding of the suburban problem emerging. Based on this understanding, there are other scenarios for future that emerge. If the suburb in the dominant discourses is described as a container of anomalies and insecurities, youth describe the tower-block suburb as a safe place, as a family, a place where they are cared for and feel at home. This particular story about the suburb is formed in contrast to the stories about the suburb told by the outside world, giving an entirely different description of the suburb from the one told by the youth. Certainly, there are 'stuff happening' also in the suburb, in terms of violence and criminal acts. But in the case of 'stuff happening', these cases tend to be exaggerated, not least by the media. 'In every country, there are the excluded suburbs, which are generally referred to as: "Do not go there, it's dangerous"', Siana says. 'But it's just bullshit. There is more murder downtown than here... I don't think they are aware of it, but they really hurt us'.

Among the youth, there is a focus on the mechanisms of racialized social exclusion as the main challenges for the inhabitants of the tower-block suburb. As illustrated by the youth, the dominant discourses about the suburb and their inhabitants are not only floating signifiers, words without further implications. Rather, these discourses have a range of concrete, material effects for those living in the areas portrayed as different: 'they do hurt us'.

Myner, one of the youth interviews, provide concrete examples of the material

consequences that the descriptions of the dangerous and unsafe suburb may have for those living there: 'It affects us, for example, if you are buying a car and you see the cost of the insurance. When you are applying for a job, they very much ask where you live. Everything is getting more expensive because of these prejudices'.

By making comparisons and referring to previous experiences, youth describe the tower-block suburb as a safe place, where they belong and feel at home, in stark contrast to the unsafe world of the outside, surrounding society, where they are not allowed to belong in the same way as in their 'own' suburb. Based on previous experiences, young people describe how they do not feel at home when they move in other parts of the city: 'one feels outside, simply'. They are looked upon and treated as being different, in the way they dress, in their appearance, their way of speaking and behaving.

## Dreams about the future

Young people's stories about their existence today, in the safe place of the tower-block suburb, also shape their stories about the future, how they conceive of and talk about the future – for themselves as individuals and as well as for the suburb at large. In the young people's stories about the future, there is a recurring pattern in a strong willingness to change current living conditions and dominating discourses in society – i.e. of not giving up about all of the difficulties and challenges that young people face in their everyday lives.

In their stories about the future, youth argue that they can expect greater difficulties and challenges, just by living in the suburb. However, this description of the future and how the future is expected to be is not one-dimensional, but is based on harsh descriptions of difficulties as well as hopes of change and opportunities.

I'm a woman from Thailand, and I don't have a Swedish surname. Few people can pronounce my last name, and nobody knows how to spell it [laughter]. I'm also working class. Sure, some people are fighting for equality, that immigrants should have the same opportunities and some are struggling with the working class, but I am at the bottom in all three categories... I'm a little afraid of the future. If there are a thousand job applicants and I am one of them, how far will I get? It's a little dark, but I hope it will get better. If you live with that dream, there is still a chance.

Here, Mara illustrates how contemporary life conditions form her situation not only today but also in the future, as her plans for the future are conceived of as restricted and regulated by the fact that she is a young, working-class woman 'from Thailand'. At the same time, for Mara, as well as for other youth living in suburban areas, there are hopes and dreams for the future. What makes the future hopeful is that there is still a chance. For this chance to be realized, you need to keep hoping – and want change to happen: 'If you live with that dream, there is still a chance'.

## May the tower-block suburbs burn

In the stories of young people there are valuable lessons to listen to in order to understand and to deal with the current situation in suburban areas throughout Sweden. Among the local actors interviewed in the project, the main focus is put on the local area and its inhabitants, its shortcomings and deviations as a problem – and the main solution identified consists of getting the inhabitants to adapt to and change themselves to the demands of the surrounding Swedish society. As illustrated in the interviews with youth living in the suburbs, young people are no passive victims of the current socio-economic conditions and the various difficulties they encounter in everyday life. They certainly see obstacles – among these current discourses about the suburbs as a problem. However, they also see opportunities. According to the youth, the obstacles must be overcome. Among the youth, there is a strong will for change, something that is hardly visible in the stories told by the local actors interviewed in the project.

At large, the interviews with youth confirm the main results of previous research illustrating how suburban youth are strongly affected by current structural conditions and dominant discourses. Unlike the main line of argument in dominant discourses on the challenges of ‘areas of exclusion’ in Sweden, suburban youth are neither passive nor victims. As evidenced in previous research, as well as shown in this project, youth develop a wide repertoire of strategies in order to negotiate with and also challenge prevailing conditions and dominant discourses.

Today there is a broad range of examples of negotiations. An increasingly loud mobilization is taking place among young people in suburban Sweden – against existing discourses on exclusion, accelerating patterns of inequality and welfare changes (cf. Schierup et al. 2014). Not least, popular culture is one of the arenas where such negotiations are being played out, for example in hip-hop, where negotiations are ongoing, making it possible for youth to develop a sense of pride in living in the Swedish urban periphery.

One thing is certain. Young people in the tower-block suburbs are on fire. What emerges as one of the most pressing questions today is how these flames can be dealt with, directed towards building a more inclusive society. The challenges are great, yet the time is short.

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