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Being evicted is bad for mental health and life expectancy; be wary of weakening rental laws, says visiting Swedish professor

Visiting academic, Professor Sten-Ake Stenberg, of Stockholm University, is in Melbourne this week warning social workers that eviction can have serious and long-lasting impacts on the health and mental health of renters, increasing rates of suicide, illness, homelessness and morbidity.

Visiting Australia as part of the **Unison Housing Research LaB project**, Professor Stenberg's visit coincides with the current debate around proposed changes to Victoria's rental laws, and will highlight how being evicted from housing can drastically alter the course of a person's life. Just last month, the Council to Homeless Persons [released data showing that the number of people evicted into homelessness has doubled](#) in the last five years, as the cost of rent skyrocket.

Professor Stenberg argues that being evicted from your home should be treated like other crises such as relationship breakdown, losing a job, or the death of a loved one.

The social equality expert will contrast the drastically different experience of renting in Sweden, where renters have much stronger legal protections, including capped rents negotiated by a tenants' union, leases that have no end date, and far fewer 'legitimate reasons for eviction' (e.g. in Sweden the sale of a house is not grounds for evicting the tenants – the sale must include the tenants).

Swedish research shows that the mere threat of eviction is enough to tip people into serious mental health episodes. Shockingly, the study found that people facing eviction have a suicide rate three times that of the general population, and equivalent to a sample group of people suffering schizophrenia.

Professor Stenberg warns that a balance must be struck between maintaining the rights of landlords, and ensuring there are adequate laws to protect vulnerable people from losing their home. He says that making it easier to evict people from their housing is counterproductive if there is a shortage of housing for them to move.

Professor Stenberg's visit is especially timely given Victoria, and many other Australian States, is in the midst of significant reform to its Rental Tenancies Act. A range of controversial reforms have been proposed, including the ability for landlords to more quickly and easily evict tenants, and the inclusion of additional reasons for tenant eviction. The new legislation is expected in Parliament later in the year.

Welfare agencies have expressed their concern about elements of the proposed reform of rental laws, that would strengthen landlords powers and put vulnerable tenants at greater risk of eviction and homelessness

"Getting into private rental and keeping it is already hard enough for many people struggling on low or irregular incomes, or who've experienced family breakdown, job loss or mental illness," said Kate Colvin, Acting CEO of Council to Homeless Persons.

The Victorian Government has committed to removing the ‘no reason notice to vacate’ provision as part of their [Rent Fair](#) agenda, but haven’t yet ruled out [introducing a ream of new reasons to evict tenants, and to](#) making it easier and quicker to kick people out of their homes.”– continues-
“Losing your home, whether you rent or own, is traumatic and destabilising,” said Ms Colvin.

What it is like to be a renter in Sweden vs Australia

Sweden	Australia
Social security incomes in Sweden are sufficient to afford private rental	In Melbourne, just 6% of private rentals are affordable to someone on a Centrelink income
Rents in Sweden are not set solely by landlords, but are negotiated by a tenants’ unions and landlord organisations	Rents are set according to what the market will pay.
A Swedish landlord cannot break a lease without a legitimate reason; commonly rent arrears or anti-social behaviour. Sale of the house, or using house for his own family are not legitimate reasons	Landlords can give 120 days notice to vacate for no reason, if tenants are on a month-to-month lease.
If a landlord wants to sell his/her house, that must include all tenants. Tenants have a legal protection of their lease.	Landlords can give a 60 day notice to vacate if they want to sell the house, if the tenant is on a month-to-month lease.
Leases have not end date.	Leases are time limited. 94% of Australian renters have a lease agreement of 12 months or less
In the 60s/70s, in response to chronic housing shortages, the Swedish Govt embarked upon the One Million Homes program, building one million high-rise flats over 10 years. Today, one-quarter of Swedes live in a One Million Homes flat or house.	Public housing stock makes up about 5% of all housing stock in Australia.

Professor Sten-Ake Stenberg is visiting Australia as part of a **Unison Housing Research LaB project**. The LaB is a research collaboration between RMIT University and Unison Housing, one of Victoria’s largest providers of social housing. The LaB is situated in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS) at RMIT.

About Professor Sten-Ake Stenberg

Sten-Åke Stenberg is a professor of Sociology at the Swedish Institute of Social Research, Stockholm University. His research interest is social disadvantage in the housing and labour market. He is currently involved in a long-term project on social inequality and a longitudinal study of all Swedish households threatened by eviction.



**Media enquiries: Lanie Harris, Council to Homeless Persons, 0418 552 377 or
lanie@chp.org.au**