

Unaccompanied children who disappear in Sweden

Ombudsman for Children in Sweden - 2017



IN SWEDEN, 1,736 unaccompanied children went missing between January 2014 and October 2017. That is roughly the equivalent of 60 school classes. It is alarming that so many children have disappeared in Sweden during this period and that only a fraction of them return or are found. The situation is particularly serious for minors who live on the street where everyday life is often characterised by exploitation, criminality and drugs. The Ombudsman for Children has been tasked by the government to find out more about why unaccompanied children go missing. The assignment requires the Ombudsman to listen to children who have returned after disappearing, and investigate the circumstances linked to their disappearance. The purpose of our report is to present the children's own narratives about why they disappear and how it is to live under these circumstances. The stories provide a clearer picture of the situation which will help to prevent an added number of children from disappearing.

THE CHILDREN'S STORIES

We have talked to unaccompanied children who have experiences of disappearing from foster homes, residential care homes and state-run care homes for adolescents. A significant proportion of the children spoke about different types of improper conditions at their place of accommodation, for example, violence, threat, abuse and violation of personal integrity. Others described a series of individual incidents which in the end made them decide to leave.

Some of the children's comments:

- They are not allowed to live with or close to their siblings or relatives.
- They have been prevented from practising their religion or they have suffered discrimination because of their background.

- They have traumatic memories of war, violence, poverty and exploitation.
- They are in poor mental health.
- They have been subjected to sexual abuse, both during their flight and in Sweden.
- They are very worried about what will happen to them when they become adults.
- The protracted asylum process and the waiting is very difficult for them.

After talking to children, the Ombudsman's conclusion is that many of them have lived in extremely difficult circumstances after disappearing. Therefore, when they return, it is important that they be asked if they have been subjected to violence or abuse, if they have any drug addictions or if they have been involved in criminal activities. Any need for treatment must be identified.

THE OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN'S SUGGESTIONS

- Prevent minors from disappearing by ensuring that they are placed in a suitable, safe and secure accommodation
- Every minor who goes missing is to be actively sought for
- Ensure that support and protection are provided when minors return

THE CHILDREN'S OWN SUGGESTIONS

Suggestions to adults

1. Adults in charge must listen to us children, take what we say seriously and do something about it.

Akram says:

"First of all, people must listen to what we youngsters say. People must also take what we say seriously. If what we say is sensible, they must listen to us but if what we say is silly, well, just ignore it. And then they must do something about the matter."

Khalif has some advice for legal guardians:

"They can just pick up their phone and make a call and ask how things are. You know, be a bit friendly and so on. That sort of thing. From the heart. So we know

someone is thinking about us. I need an adult who can help me and so on. Everyone needs that. Not just me."

2. The personnel at accommodation centres and foster homes must show an understanding and be able to give love and care and be responsible adults.

Amad calls for adults who care:

"It's more a matter of them having empathy. They must be aware of what we have been through. They must understand but unfortunately, ever since I came here, no one has understood us."

Khalif says:

"We don't want to disappear; we just want help. If we get help, we won't take drugs and that sort of thing. We will behave. We will go to school; we will do lots of things that are good and important for the future."



3. The Swedish Migration Agency must dare to speak about reality and make faster decisions.

Nuhad wants case officers to give honest and clear information:

”The only advice I would give to the Swedish Migration Agency is that they must say the truth to children who come to Sweden. They mustn’t raise their hopes or lie to them. They must explain to them that things can turn out like this or like that. There may be a negative decision but there may also be a positive decision.”

Jaser thinks that more minors should be allowed to stay:

”All the unaccompanied minors who come here do so because of a problem. They don’t come here because it’s fun; they leave their parents and their loved ones.

They come here, they cross mountains, sea and the Sahara. Not because they think it’s fun but because they are in need. They have the right to stay here and be protected.”

The children’s advice to other children

1. You are not alone! Dare to talk to other children and adults about how you feel.

2. Do not disappear from your accommodation and dare to go to school even if you don’t have a residence permit.

The whole report is available at barnombudsmannen.se/forsvinner

