Unaccompanied Minors Who Go Missing

The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden – 2017
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Preface

The number of unaccompanied minors who have gone missing in Sweden has increased significantly in recent years. At the same time, the efforts to find these children appear deficient as many children are still missing.

Cases involving unaccompanied minors who go missing are not being taken seriously. The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden pointed this out in a communication to the Government as early as 2008. At that time, we stressed that society needs to take a greater responsibility for following up and investigating when children go missing. The question of responsibility is still a current issue. Over the last years the Ombudsman for Children has systematically listened to children and young people who are refugees. In 2015, we visited reception accommodation facilities and met recently arrived children, but some of the children we were to meet with had gone missing by the time we arrived. What was most frightening was that no one knew where they had gone.

In 2016, we were given the task of meeting with unaccompanied minors to find out the reasons why children go missing and the circumstances that are connected to their disappearance. A worrying insight from our conversations is that several children who have gone missing feel that no one misses them. It is my opinion that each child who goes missing has to feel they are missed and being searched for, just like any other child in Sweden.

The focus of our conversations has been children and young people’s accounts of why they left an accommodation facility, how they lived while they were away and what contributed to them coming back.

One girl tells us: “I had no one who can help me. Nobody. But I had told my social worker, I had told my custodian, I had told my psychologist. Everyone who is close to me, those who tell me ‘we will help you’, but I got nothing.”

Children we have met tell us about how they feel let down by the adults responsible who were supposed to be there to look after them. Most describe the time they were missing as a tough period during which they were very vulnerable. These children have often lived on the streets, with insufficient food and clothing, and nowhere to sleep.

“I slept on the street, sometimes I didn’t eat for three or four days. They were hard times, I can tell you”, describes one boy.

According to Articles 20 and 22 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sweden shall provide unaccompanied minors with special protection and help. In 2015, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Sweden investigate all cases of unaccompanied minors who disappear and to take all necessary action to increase their protection.2

The Ombudsman’s analysis indicates that unaccompanied minors’ needs have not been sufficiently investigated when they are being placed and that the placements have often not matched the needs of these children. We also see a picture that suggests children who go missing are not searched for in the same way as other children in Sweden.

The method we have used is qualitative. This means that the results cannot be generalised for all unaccompanied minors who go missing. Nonetheless, the accounts give an impression of what life can be like for these children. This may contribute to creating a better understanding of how unaccompanied minors can experience life and hopefully prevent more children going missing. Children and young people have talked about their experiences in the hope that this will bring about change, so that no other children have to go through what they have. Now it is our responsibility as adults to listen to the children’s accounts and take responsibility for making the changes that are required.

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1 The opinions of the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden regarding prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes, communication addressed to the Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality on 19 March 2008, ref. no. 10.1:02/87/08.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the children and young people who met with us and told us their stories, expanded our knowledge and gave us good advice. I would also like to thank the County Administrative Board of Stockholm and the Swedish Migration Agency for collaborating so well with us.

Anita Wickström
Acting Ombudsman for Children
General principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 2 pertains to the equal value and rights of all children. No one may be discriminated against. The Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to all children who are in a country that has adopted it.

Article 3 states that it is the best interests of the child that shall be a primary consideration in all actions that concern the child. The concept of ‘the best interests of the child’ is the cornerstone of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and has been analysed more than any other concept. That which is in the best interests of the child must be determined in each individual case and consideration shall be given to the child’s own views and experience.

Article 6 underlines every child’s right to life, survival and development. This is not just a matter of the child’s physical health, but also their spiritual, moral, psychological and social development.

Article 12 highlights the child’s right to form and express their views and have them taken into account in all matters that affect the child. When these views are taken into account, consideration shall be given to the child’s age and maturity.

Articles of particular importance to unaccompanied minors who have gone missing

Article 19 on the child’s right to protection from all forms of violence and abuse
Article 20 on protection and support for children who have been deprived of their family environment
Article 22 on the rights of refugee children
Article 24 on the right to healthcare
Article 27 on the right to an adequate standard of living
Article 31 on the right to play, rest and leisure
Article 34 on the right to be protected from sexual exploitation and human trafficking
Article 39 on the right to recovery and social reintegration
Summary

The Ombudsman for Children has been commissioned by the Swedish Government to learn more about why unaccompanied minors go missing. According to the government commission, the Ombudsman for Children shall listen to what those children who have come back after having gone missing have to say about the circumstances connected to their disappearance.

A total of 1,736 children went missing in Sweden between January 2014 and October 2017, which is the equivalent of 60 school classes. It is alarming that so many children have gone missing in Sweden during this period and that only a fraction returned or were found. The situation is especially serious for the children and young people who are living on the streets, where exploitation, crime and drugs are often features of their everyday lives.

According to Articles 20 and 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sweden shall provide unaccompanied minors with special protection and help. Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that no child in Sweden shall be discriminated against on the basis of their background.

The purpose of this report is to highlight the children’s own accounts of the circumstances surrounding their disappearance and life as a missing person, as well as to gain a clearer picture of the situation in order to be able to prevent children going missing. We have met unaccompanied minors with experiences of disappearing from a foster home, network home, residential care home (HVU) or state-run residential home for young people. A significant proportion of the children describe a variety of shortcomings with the home in which they have been placed. The shortcomings the children describe may include violence, threats, abuse and insults. For other children several individual incidents have led to a tipping point. This may also involve mental ill-health or being separated from family and friends. The children told us that:

- They are not allowed to live with or near their siblings or relatives.
- They have been prevented from practising their religion or been discriminated against due to their background.
- They carry with them difficult memories of war, violence, poverty and exploitation.
- They have poor mental health.
- They have been subjected to sexual assaults on their journey to Sweden and after their arrival.
- They are very anxious about what will happen when they become adults.
- They find the long asylum process and the wait tough.

In the Ombudsman for Children’s meetings with children and young people, it became evident that, to a large extent, they have lived under very difficult circumstances during the period they were missing. It is therefore important that when they return they are asked about their experiences of exposure to violence, including abuse, and about potential drug dependence or criminality. Any treatment needs there may be must also be noted.

The Ombudsman for Children proposes the following changes:

1. Prevent children going missing by ensuring safety and expertise when placing unaccompanied minors
2. All children who go missing must be looked for
3. Ensure that there is support and protection when children return
What we did

The Ombudsman for Children has been commissioned by the Swedish Government to learn more about why unaccompanied minors go missing. According to the Government commission, the Ombudsman for Children shall listen to the children who have come back after having gone missing, regarding the circumstances connected to their disappearance.3

The commission includes obtaining information from the Swedish Migration Agency. In autumn 2016, we requested statistics from the Migration Agency pertaining to unaccompanied minors who were registered as missing between September 2014 and September 2016. It proved to be difficult to locate these children on the basis of the Migration Agency’s data as they had moved or changed custodians in connection with going missing. Consequently, we decided in spring 2017, in addition to the information provided by the Migration Agency, to contact state-run residential homes for young people, HVB homes with a special focus on unaccompanied minors, social services, chief guardian committees, custodians and organisations that work with unaccompanied minors or undocumented young people. We subsequently came into contact with 31 children and young people, 23 of whom had experiences of going missing.

An additional 18 children and young people have participated in meetings within the scope of the work involved in producing the Ombudsman for Children’s annual report for 2017. We have reached these children through similar contacts to those described above, but also by shadowing the police and social services in their work on the streets. When children have told us during these meeting that they have gone missing for a period of time, we have integrated their experiences into this government commission. This means that the meetings with children on which this report is based may have been included in the Ombudsman for Children’s annual report for 2017 but have been analysed from different aspects in that context. These children’s stories have now been analysed again for this commission, with a specific focus on their experiences of going missing.

Despite us having sought out children with experiences of having gone missing, there were some children who did not talk about any such experiences when we met with them. We have chosen not to analyse their voices. The analysis is based on the voices of 41 children and young people who have experience of going missing. Of these, four are girls and 37 are boys between the ages of 13 and 20. Some had turned 18 when we met but talked about experiences prior to or in connection with their 18th birthday. Some of these young people say that they are children but that they have had their age adjusted upwards. We have chosen to include their stories as they represent a vulnerable group that has a high risk of going missing. Their accounts can contribute to our understanding of why children and young people go missing and how society can prevent this. Some of these young people still continue to live as missing persons.

A large number of the children we have met are placed in state-run residential homes for young people, which means that they, to a greater extent than other children, may have experience of being picked up by the police and spending time in locked institutions.

The meetings with these children have taken place at the Ombudsman for Children’s premises, at accommodation facilities, at the premises of non-profit organisations and on the street. Some of the conversations have been held with the aid of an interpreter.

Young Speakers: When the child is the expert

We have used the method Young Speakers in our meetings with children. The basic premise is that the children talk about what they themselves have experienced. We regard the child as an expert on their own situation, who is able on this basis to share their experiences and views. The children raise the issues they believe are important. The conversation leader listens to what the children have to say and asks in-depth and targeted questions about areas that are important in order to understand the circumstances surrounding their disappearance. It is a qualitative method that aims to provide in-depth knowledge about the conditions for children and their

3Government commission to the Ombudsman for Children. Reference number: 52016/04467/FST.
opinions. The interpretive analysis is based on the children’s voices and the rights of the child. It contains proposals concerning measures that may improve the situation for children and young people.

With a few exceptions, we have recorded and transcribed the conversations. In our analysis we have chosen to focus on three overarching themes in the children’s accounts: reasons for going missing, life as a missing person and returning. The quotes used in the report have been chosen because they highlight different aspects of the children’s accounts. Sometimes they represent patterns we have found in our analysis, sometimes they represent important experiences or viewpoints raised by individual children and young people. In some places we have made smaller corrections to quotes in order for the language to flow better or to avoid the children being identified. We have given all children and young people pseudonyms.

Some of the children we met had a great deal to say about the themes of this report. They provide long descriptions of their experiences and have a lot of opinions to share. Others gave more brief information. This means that some children’s accounts become more prominent than those of others.

Children and young people talk about both positive and negative experiences they have had since coming to Sweden. The report largely highlights the negative experiences because the purpose of the government commission is to shine light on the reasons why children go missing. The children and young people we have met represent only themselves. However, what they describe do serve as examples of the sort of circumstances that may surround an unaccompanied minor’s disappearance.

According to the commission’s terms of reference, it is to be conducted with a clear perspective on the rights of the child and gender equality. We have therefore asked questions about potential differences between girls and boys. The material we have analysed contains, as has already been stated, more conversations with boys than with girls. As there are only a few girls included in the data we have chosen not to draw any conclusions concerning gender differences.

The government commission states that we are to collaborate with the County Administrative Board of Stockholm and take into particular consideration the county administrative boards’ remit with regard to unaccompanied minors who go missing. Since the start of the commission, the Ombudsman for Children has maintained continuous contact with the County Administrative Board of Stockholm.

Definitions

**Responsible adults**

The report uses the term *responsible adults*. With this term the Ombudsman for Children refers to the actors that have a formal responsibility for the unaccompanied minors. This may be social services, a custodian or the Migration Agency.

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4 The analytical method is described in more detail in Helén Thomsson’s book: *Analysera intervjuer – om konsten att göra kvalitativa analyser vid statliga verk och myndigheter* (Analysing interviews – the art of conducting qualitative analyses in central government agencies and authorities), 2014.
Background

“I have just chosen a name for my problems, like the travel of being inside out. It’s like a title I’ve chosen because you’re physically inside a country but mentally you are outside. You don’t feel like you’re a part of this country, and that’s quite sad.”

In recent years, a large number of unaccompanied minors have made their way to Europe. In 2015, a total of 35,269 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in Sweden, which was a greater number than ever before. Even though the numbers have decreased since then, a large number of unaccompanied minors are still living in Sweden while waiting for, or after having received, a decision in the asylum process.

As the number of unaccompanied minors applying for asylum in Sweden has increased, the number of them who go missing has risen. According to the Migration Agency, 1,736 unaccompanied minors went missing in Sweden between January 2014 and October 2017. Some of these children have returned but 1,456 are still missing. We seldom know exactly the situations in which these children end up when they fall outside the system put in place to protect them. What we do know, however, is that unaccompanied minors run a particularly high risk of falling victim to human trafficking and criminal networks. There have also been cases of unaccompanied minors who have gone missing being found dead.

Unaccompanied minors going missing is not a new phenomenon. A noted case involved the around 100 Chinese unaccompanied minors who applied for asylum in Sweden in autumn 2004 and subsequently disappeared from the Migration Agency’s asylum accommodations. Several people were later sentenced for human trafficking in connection with this case. Some of the children were eventually traced to other European countries. What happened to the rest of the children is still unknown.

Unaccompanied minors disappearing is not a phenomenon that is unique to Sweden. In early 2016, Europol reported that at least 10,000 children had gone missing from asylum centres all around Europe. This is a figure that Europol believes to be a significant underestimate.

In accordance with Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children in Sweden shall have their rights ensured without discrimination of any kind. Unaccompanied minors have the same rights as other children in Sweden, regardless of their legal status. According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, it is especially important to acknowledge groups of children whose rights are at risk of being ignored. The obligation not to discriminate may require that special measures be put in place to ensure the rights of individual children or groups of children.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child regularly reviews Sweden’s compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As early as 2005, the committee expressed concern about the large number of unaccompanied minors who had gone missing from Migration Agency

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6 Children may have gone missing before registering an asylum application with the Migration Agency. The numbers are to be read in relation to the number of children who have applied for asylum during this period.
7 Statistics from the Migration Agency received on 18/10/2017. Pertains to the period 01/01/2014 to 17/10/2017. See Appendix 1.
10 Människohandel för arbetskraftsexploatering m.m. — kartläggning, analys och forslag till handlingsplan (Trafficking in Human Beings for the Purpose of Labour Exploitation etc. — Mapping, analysis and proposal for an action plan), Ds 2008:7, pp. 86 f.
12 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 5 (2003). General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 4, 42 and 44.6), point 12.
accommodation facilities and recommended that Sweden improve the cooperation between the various actors involved when a child goes missing.13 The Ombudsman for Children emphasised that it was unacceptable that these disappearances were not being taken seriously in a communication to the Government in 2008. This communication concerned prostitution and human trafficking and we highlighted points including the necessity of enhancing the support provided to unaccompanied minors. The Ombudsman for Children also argued that society must take greater responsibility for following up and investigating cases of children who go missing from foster homes and institutions.14

In its most recent recommendations to Sweden in 2015, the Committee on the Rights of the Child once more expressed its concern about the large number of cases involving unaccompanied minors who go missing and the fact that most of these are not sufficiently investigated. Sweden was therefore recommended to investigate all cases of unaccompanied minors who go missing and to take all necessary action to increase the protection these children are given.15 The UN Human Rights Committee has also expressed concern that Sweden has failed to account for the large numbers of unaccompanied minors who have applied for asylum and subsequently gone missing, as well as for the risk that these children will fall victim to human trafficking.16

In 2015, as a result of the concerns expressed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Ombudsman for Children summoned relevant authorities to talk about unaccompanied minors who go missing. A number of deficiencies were identified at these talks and it became clear that the authorities lacked knowledge about the children who go missing. Following these talks, the Ombudsman for Children wrote to the Government to complain that the protection provided to unaccompanied minors in Sweden is too weak. In this communication, we proposed that an action plan be developed in order to prevent unaccompanied minors from going missing.17 The county administrative boards were subsequently tasked by the Government with conducting a national survey in 2016 and 2017, proposing measures for unaccompanied minors who go missing and disseminating results and methods to relevant actors.18 The national survey that was published in 2016 indicated that there has been a lack of knowledge and information about what happens to children who go missing and the reasons why they go missing.19

Who are the unaccompanied minors who go missing in Sweden today? Why do they go missing from their placements and how do they live while they are missing? What makes some of the children return? What support are they given when they return? The purpose of this

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14 Barnombudsmanens synpunktar angående prostitution och människohandel försexuella ändamål (The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden’s viewpoints regarding prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes), communication addressed to the Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality on 19 March 2008, ref. no. 10:1/02/2008.
15 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Sweden. CRC/SWE/CO/5, points 49.a and 50.a.
16 UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Sweden. CCRP/C/SWE/CO/7, point 34.
17 Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, Nationellt handlingsplan för att stärka skyddet för ensamkommande ensamstående barn (National action plan to strengthen the protection of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children), communication addressed to the Minister for Children, the Elderly and Gender Equality, Åsa Regnéron 26 February 2015, ref. no. 3 5:1:0181/15.
18 Swedish Government, Uppdrag om ensamkommande barn som försvinner (Commission concerning unaccompanied minors who go missing), ref. no. 52016/00634/FST, http://www.regeringen.se/regeringsupdrag/2016/02/uppdrag-om-ensamkommande-barnsom-forsvinner, accessed 3/11/2017. This commission states that the County Administrative Board of Stockholm shall coordinate the work of the county administrative boards and reporting of the commission.
19 County Administrative Board of Stockholm, På flyktoch försvunnen -- En nationell kartläggning av ensamkommande barn som avviker (Lost in Migration -- A National Survey of Missing Unaccompanied Minors), Report 2016:25. The county administrative boards’ work on this government commission has also resulted in proposed measures for the Government and a methodological support (see County administrative boards, På flyktoch försvunnen -- Sammanställning av åtgärdsförlag till regeringen om barn som försvinner i Sverige (Lost in migration -- Summary of proposed measures to the Government concerning children who go missing in Sweden), 2017; County administrative boards, På flyktoch försvunnen -- Metodstöd för regional samverkan kring ensamkommande barn som försvinner (Lost in migration -- Methodological support for regional cooperation concerning unaccompanied minors who go missing), 2017. The part of this commission that pertains to dissemination is continuing in 2017. For more information please see the County Administrative Board of Stockholm website: http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/Stockholm/Sv/manniska-och-samhalle/manskliga-rättigheter/ensamkommande-barn-som-forsvinner.
report is to highlight the children’s own accounts of the circumstances surrounding their disappearance and life as a missing person, as well as to gain a better picture of the situation in order to be able to prevent children going missing.
Reasons why children go missing
The Ombudsman for Children’s meetings with unaccompanied minors who have gone missing have been moving. We were aware from our work with unaccompanied minors over the course of 2015 and 2016 that the situation for many of them has been difficult. We already knew that unaccompanied minors go missing and that many have done so in connection with various decisions related to the asylum process. After our conversations with unaccompanied minors, the picture has changed, and we now understand that the situation is far more complex than what we previously knew. Many of the children repeatedly state that they do not want any child to go through what they have.

The children tell their stories
We have met unaccompanied minors with experiences of disappearing from a foster home, network home\textsuperscript{20}, residential care home (HVB) or state-run residential home for young people. Some children have gone missing once, but we have also met children who have gone missing several times; some up to twenty times. A child can go missing from a home for many different reasons and there is rarely one single cause.

\textbf{Discomfort — and adults who do not listen}
A significant proportion of the children describe a variety of shortcomings with the home in which they have been placed. For some children, the shortcomings have been so severe that they have felt they cannot stay a day longer. For other children several individual incidents have led to a tipping point. The shortcomings the children describe may include violence, threats, abuse and insults.

Amad describes a situation in the home involving another boy:

“I said to the staff, I said that this boy has said that ‘I’m gonna kill you’ so that’s what made me go one night and sleep in the city on the streets, because I was threatened by this boy, who the staff did nothing about. So out of fear.”

Aisha talks about problems in more than ten foster homes and HVB homes and she has gone missing almost as many times. In the homes where she was placed, she faced alcohol abuse, assault, constant arguments and self-harming behaviour among other young people. She says that she tried to get help.

“I had no one who could help me. Nobody. But I had told my social worker, I had told my custodian, I had told my psychologist. Everyone who is close to me, those who tell me ‘we will help you’, but I got nothing.”

When nothing happened, she took to the streets.

Children state how they would like their social workers and custodians to have more contact with them and visit the home more so that they can see how the children are doing with their own eyes. Some say that they no longer know who their custodian or social worker is as they have been replaced so many times. Children describe how they have tried to send out signals that something is wrong but that nothing has changed as a result.

Azzam talks about the conversations with his social worker and custodian:

“I say to them all the time ‘can you come visit me?’ I tell social services and both of them. ‘Can you come visit me one day and talk for a bit or ...?’ She says ‘no, we have a lot of work, I can’t. It takes time, it takes money.’ And my custodian as well, the custodian says the same thing.”

Yazid also describes his conversations with social services:

“First and foremost, I wasn’t happy with the family. Everything was bad in all possible ways. I applied to social services to move somewhere else. They refused ... everything that has

\textsuperscript{20} When a child is being placed, the initial consideration should be whether it is possible for the child to be taken in by a relative or someone else close to them. See the Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 6, Section 5. Some children are therefore placed in what are referred to as network homes. A network home is to be regarded as a foster home and the same assessment shall be conducted for a network home as for a foster home. See the Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 6, Section 6.
happened made me unable to cope anymore.”

Yazid says that he was unhappy and tried to signal this time and again, but nothing happened.

We have also listened to accounts from children who have not received information about why they need to move, how long they are supposed to spend in one place or whether they will have to move again. Children who have had to move many times describe how they lose contact with friends and other important people. They may be going missing because they are going to the place where they last felt safe.

Children describe how if they complain about their situation the responsible adults listen more to other adults than to the child. A number of children say that expressing your opinion does not help. Ammar has been placed in several foster homes, HVB homes and state-run residential homes for young people. He was often happy but was transferred again to a place where he was not at all happy.

“ I called my custodian and said I didn’t want to be there. He said ‘no, you have to be there’ and then I left the place without permission.”

Nasim talks about his placement in a foster home:

“The thing is that when I came to Sweden I didn’t know the rules and laws and I didn’t know anything about social services and the help you could get from them. I stayed with a family that was not nice. I left the family and lived on the streets with other friends and the people I came to Sweden with.”

He describes how the lack of information about where children can turn may lead to them going missing.

Akram felt that the staff at a state-run residential home treated him like a criminal, with strict rules. He tried to ask the staff in order to understand why these rules existed, but he received no answer. He describes his feelings:

“I wasn’t held captive but [they] isolated me in society this way.”

The feeling of being imprisoned without understanding why was a factor that contributed to his unhappiness and escape.

**Not being able to be close to those who are most important**

Family, relatives and close friends are especially important when you are alone in a new country. Some children we met talk about good foster homes or HVB homes but say that the quality of the accommodation does not matter when they are not allowed to live with or close to their siblings or relatives. Not being able to be close to those who are most important can be reason enough for children to go missing.

Faathir was initially placed together with his brother in Stockholm. This meant a lot to him.

“If I go to see my brother in the morning then that day will be the best day for me. I have energy, I have everything, I can go to work, I can go to school. But I only have my brother here, he’s good...”

Faathir was then transferred to another city and the brothers were split up. He appealed to social services to be close to his brother but was denied. He then ran away. Faathir says that he lived on the streets for almost a year in order to be close to his brother.

Nadira was separated from her sibling. She had never previously lived without her sibling and says that she felt lonely and empty. She could not imagine a life without her sibling, but they received no help to meet each other. Nadira left her accommodation and made her own way to her sibling. When we meet her, she says that she is still not allowed to live with her sibling, but she can phone on certain days and at certain times during the week.

Rakin says that he was informed that his cousin was in Sweden. He was allowed to leave the home for a few days to look for his cousin. He was away from the home until he found his cousin. He lived on the streets for several months while searching.

**Longing for a meaningful everyday life**

Being placed with others who do not speak the same language, combined with loneliness and idleness, can contribute to children going missing. Badru describes one of his placements as follows:
“They placed me in a home out in a village. And there is no one on the street and no one I can communicate with. No one I can talk to. And then I ran away from there because I wanted to talk to my friends and people who speak the same language.”
For him, the combination of being far away from a larger community and not being able to speak to anyone became unsustainable.

Eben came to Sweden in the middle of summer and was placed in a home where no one spoke his language. Since it was summer, he could not go to school and there were no activities at the home. Finally, he could not stand the loneliness and not having anything to do so he left the home to make his way back to his friends on the street.

We have met many children who are placed in HVB homes or state-run residential homes for young people. More so than children in foster homes, these children tell us that there is nothing to do during the day. Akram says:
“...but the problem there is that in these towns you’re very isolated. Very isolated. There is no communication with people, as if you were imprisoned in some way. You go to school and then back again. There is nothing to do after school. You either watch TV or you play Playstation.”

Akram describes how the lack of activities can contribute to feeling like you do not have a meaningful everyday life. He does not say that this was the only reason he went missing, but we understand that it was a contributory factor. Some of the children we meet also say that they have not gone to school for longer or shorter periods of time.

**Being treated badly**
Some of the children we have met talk about how they have been prevented from practising their religion and customs or been discriminated against based on their ethnicity by foster parents or other responsible adults. These incidents have contributed to the children going missing.

Yazid is a Muslim and lived in a network home where he was not happy. He felt that he did not have the opportunity to practise his religion in the home and had already asked to be transferred several times.

“The month of Ramadan was coming up. Then, you know, during the month of Ramadan we have some customs and traditions and I couldn’t do that there. And then she said [the social worker] to me ‘these customs and traditions, you can do them in Syria, not here. You’re in Sweden’.”

Another boy says that he only eats halal, due to his religion but that the home did not want to serve him halal. He therefore bought food with his own money. When he asked if he could eat the food he had bought himself the staff at the home said no.

Fares felt that he was treated worse than the other children placed in the same foster home, just because he came from another country and they were from Sweden. He talks about how the Swedish children who were placed in the family received more pocket money and care. Fares describes an incident in the foster home when the foster father asked him why he was grumpy and sad.

“I’ve been very sad as I have so many emotions, difficult emotions from my home country and from fleeing, that is why I didn’t want to talk to [the foster father].” The foster father then called him “bloody foreigner”.

The children who describe having been treated badly due to their ethnicity, culture or religion also mention other factors that contributed to them going missing. A common theme in the children’s accounts is that they feel offended, hurt, ostracised and badly treated by those who are supposed to be there for them every day. The children describe that the worst feeling is that no responsible adult has listened or done anything to change the situation.

**Severe trauma from their home countries and the journey to Sweden**
The unaccompanied minors we have met all carry with them difficult memories. They may have experienced war, oppression, threats, violence, terrorism, poverty or various forms of exploitation.
The strength, perseverance and determination of the unaccompanied minors is evident in our conversations. It is also clear that their mental health is poor after everything they have been through. Many describe thoughts about taking their own lives or suicide attempts. Coming to a new country and being placed in a home that is strange and unfamiliar can be difficult. Akram describes how he felt after having been moved to a HVB home:

“I fell out with the other young people at that home. I’ve never lived with other people before. I’ve only ever lived with my mum.”

Both girls and boys talk about how they have been victims of sexual assault while fleeing and in Sweden. Aisha describes in detail how the men who helped her flee played poker in a refugee camp to decide who would take her virginity. She describes a fear of what would happen to her but also says that it really is nothing to be surprised about, that it happens to most girls. A man who helped her wanted her to marry him as payment. She had not even turned 15 at the time.

“That smuggler, he said ‘I want you to marry me’. I was like ‘what? I’m your daughter.’ He’s like about my dad’s age. And then he said, ‘I want to have children with you’. I was like ‘I’m a child myself, how can I have children?’ I didn’t even know how you could have children.”

What Aisha has been through affects her to this day. We understand, based on what she tells us, that she finds it difficult to trust responsible adults, especially when they do not react when she talks about shortcomings in her placements. She says that she goes missing when she can no longer stand it.

Nadira says in one conversation that she has been imprisoned in her country of origin. She was separated from her family and held in a small dark cell with no windows and no contact with the outside world. Nadira was unhappy with her placement in Sweden and was transferred but still felt so bad she wanted to commit suicide. She talks about a suicide attempt that led to her going missing from her HVB home.

“It was a locked knife drawer. I had tried to open that drawer. The staff thought that I was going to kill them, but it was rather the opposite. I wanted to kill myself. When I couldn’t open that drawer, I walked into the forest.”

One child says that his way of handling difficult emotions, memories and situations is to run away. Running away is what saved him when he was captured by the Taliban and when he, while fleeing, saw his friends being shot.

Children we have met at state-run residential homes for young people say that they have friends who use drugs or that they have themselves used drugs at some point. They also say that they started using drugs prior to coming to Sweden and that they have continued using drugs to alleviate anxiety or deal with fear and worries.

The children describe how their drug dependence can be so strong that it is a reason in itself to go missing from the home for longer or shorter periods. Some children talk about how they have tried to stop taking drugs but that it is difficult and that they need help.

Assim talks about how his drug abuse led to him going missing from his HVB home.

“They sent me to my asylum accommodation. I was there one day. I haven’t gone out because during Ramadan, you know, I’m fasting and stuff. But I didn’t have the energy to be fasting, I ate during Ramadan because I like, hated myself, I was totally gone, drugs and everything. I can’t stop doing drugs. But I went out on the streets again and bought loads of drugs.”

**Severe worry about turning 18 and rejection**

Many children describe a great worry about what will happen when they turn 18. They talk about how they listen to rumours from other unaccompanied minors about what will happen then and that these rumours frighten them. The children talk a lot about why some people get to stay and what factors can affect the asylum process. Some talk about how the Migration Agency did not believe what they said. One boy says:

“Like, I don’t know, like how the people who work at the Migration Agency, how they make the decision even though some get a residence permit and some others don’t, for example. But
me and my friend, we came from the same city and fled from the same problems. They believed him, and they didn’t believe me.”

The children do not know if they will have somewhere to live, if they will be able stay in the same municipality and go to the same school as their friends or whether they will be able to support themselves after turning 18. For some children, their 18th birthday is just a month or so away and they tell us that the uncertainty and worrying is making them ill.

Kassim did not know how old he was so when a doctor examined him and said that he was assessed to be 17, he was happy. But in a conversation with the Migration Agency a couple of weeks later, he found out that the agency did not believe the medical assessment and that they had adjusted his age upwards. Kassim then had to move to adult accommodation immediately.

“I was the only one under 18 in the entire accommodation facility. I felt very scared actually. And I ran away from there”, he says.

Kassim is not alone. Some of the children and young people we have met who are still living as missing persons state that they were under 18 when they went missing but that it was receiving a decision that their age was being adjusted upwards that contributed to them going missing. Some of them tell us themselves that they have now turned 18. Several children describe a fear of having their age adjusted upwards. It is a process over which they feel they have no control but one in which they perceive the outcome to mean the difference between life and death. The young people say that, prior to their age being adjusted upwards, none of them had received any information about what it may mean and that it would end up changing their situation from one day to the next.

Some who have had their age adjusted upwards describe how they have gone missing out of fear of being sent to another country in Europe where they stayed before coming to Sweden.21 For Ramy, it was another country’s assessment that was the basis of the decision to adjust his age upwards. Ramy himself says that he is 17 but that the other country had registered him as older. He has family in Sweden, but was still forced to go back to the other European country. After a while he ran away and came back to Sweden and is currently living in hiding. He describes how he desperately tried to get out of his vulnerable situation:

“The problem was my fingerprints. So I thought if I burn my fingers they will disappear. When I started with one finger it really hurt, then I stopped.”

Children and young people describe an asylum process that takes a long time. Almost everyone we met is waiting for a final decision on their asylum application. Some have not yet received a decision. Others have received both one and two rejections and are waiting for a final decision. A couple of children have been granted residence permits. The asylum process and the wait are described as hard. Fares says that he has been in Sweden 15 months and has not yet been invited to the Migration Agency for an asylum investigation.

“The Migration Agency] said we’ll come and tell you later’, but I don’t know when.”

Bahah is one of the children who received a rejection prior to his 18th birthday.

“I left the foster home one month before I turned 18. Because I heard that when you’re 18 and you have a rejection from the Migration Agency, the police will come and take you. So I said to myself, it’s better I leave before they get to me. Then I got out of there.” Bahah went missing due to fear.

Nuhad explains how he felt when he received the first rejection:

“You know, it’s like falling down from heaven to the ground. Because now it’s like you had a dream and it disappeared.”

One 17-year-old boy was attending school, had friends and was happy at his HVB home when he received the decision concerning a second rejection. He says that he lost hope and started planning to run away.

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21 Regulation (EU)No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (The Dublin Regulation). The main rule is that unaccompanied minors are exempt from the Dublin Regulation.
“I just disappeared from that place and they tried to contact me all the time, but I didn’t answer because I thought no, they’ll send me back. I’m not going to have any more contact with the Migration Agency or Swedish authorities.”

Other children describe how they have gone missing in connection with rejection decisions and made their way to other countries in Europe to seek asylum.

Rana says that she was interviewed by a man at the Migration Agency. This meant that she did not dare to tell the person about certain things she had experienced and about the fear of being married off. Rana was never asked if she wanted to speak to a female case officer and interpreter and she did not know she could ask for this. Consequently, she did not dare to tell the case officer about her grounds for asylum and had her asylum application rejected. She was 16 at the time and was placed in a foster home awaiting her 18th birthday. Just before her 18th birthday, she received information that it was time to go back to her country of origin. The Migration Agency had arranged a passport for her. She never picked up her passport, instead she went missing.

**The Ombudsman for Children’s analysis**

*Analysis of the children’s voices*

The children and young people we have met each paint a clear picture of why they have gone missing, but at the same time, the overall picture is complex. One common theme is that the children have often signalled that something is not right, but the responsible adults have not listened or acted. We understand that, for most of them, there is not one single reason why they go missing. However, for some, being separated from a sibling or serious abuse, for example, may be the single reason why they go missing. We know that going missing is something that occurs among all placed children, but we were surprised that many unaccompanied minors paint a picture of a deficient protective system that contains serious shortcomings and abuse.

When the children talk about shortcomings in homes, they describe insecurity due to violence, threats, abuse and insults that continue even though they have tried to say that something is wrong. Our interpretation is that many children feel that responsible adults are not providing them with sufficient protection and care. The children we met who have been transferred several times describe how it feels like they are just being thrown around and that no one wants them. The majority of them talk about absent social workers and custodians who have no time for them.

Children’s accounts of discomfort are often based on a lack of involvement and information about placements. However, they also pertain to a lack of information about the rights of the child and how these rights are ensured. Going missing can be a way for the child to take control of their own life or a reaction to fear and insecurity.

Both boys and girls describe how there is nothing to do in their everyday lives or that they have no one to talk to. The opportunity to communicate with others in the home or nearby is a prerequisite for feeling happy. As is attending school and having something to do during the day. This is also important if the child is to feel that they have a meaningful everyday life and are thus able to think about things other than worries and problems. The right prerequisites for becoming integrated and making new friends play a major role in children’s development.

Some children talk about going missing in order to look for family and friends from whom they have become separated. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that this clearly demonstrates the importance of not separating siblings and of children receiving help to look for their family in Sweden.

Children we have met talk about difficult memories and trauma from their country of origin or from their journey to Sweden. Some of them, especially children who are now placed in locked institutions, describe how they have lost hope of achieving a good life in Sweden. They say that they no longer want to live, and some have already attempted suicide. The mental ill-health among the unaccompanied minors we have met is alarming and the children’s stories suggest that the support they need to deal with their mental health problems is lacking.
The children also describe how they use or have used drugs and how this has been a factor that has contributed to them going missing. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that this too suggests a lack of support from responsible adults. This involves both support to break free from substance abuse and to deal with the underlying causes of the substance abuse, which may be mental ill-health.

Based on the accounts, our interpretation is that children’s mental ill-health and lack of love and care from adults, contribute to them going missing. At the same time, we understand that going missing can be a strategy for dealing with memories and trauma. For the child, is can be a logical behaviour when they experience danger. For some of them, going missing in situations that signal danger has previously helped them survive.

Almost all the children and young people we have met describe a great deal of worry about turning 18, having their age adjusted upwards and receiving a rejection. We conclude that there are serious deficiencies regarding adapted and targeted information and support in advance of turning 18, upward age adjustments and potentially receiving a rejection. We are of the opinion that this leads to children and young people going missing after having listened to rumours from their friends instead of listening to the authorities or other adults.

The Ombudsman for Children understands that children may go missing as a last resort when the fear of being sent back to their country of origin becomes overpowering. Some children we have met have never been to the country their passports state as their country of origin. The worry about having their age adjusted upwards and turning 18 is likely founded in a fear of receiving a rejection. For the children it is the same as being left alone without support and help and to subsequently be deported to their country of origin.

The fear is also prominent when children describe how they go to other countries to try to seek asylum as they have nothing to lose if their only alternative in Sweden is to await deportation to their country of origin.

**Analysis based on the rights of the child**

The children’s stories suggest that their individual needs have not been investigated sufficiently from the start. Pursuant to Articles 20 and 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, unaccompanied minors have the right to special protection and alternative care. Alternative care entails a placement in a suitable foster home, network home, HVB home or state-run residential home for young people. The children’s accounts concerning their reasons for going missing suggests that the system around unaccompanied minors is, in many cases, failing them as early as at the point of their arrival in Sweden.

The children say that they have signalled that something is wrong to responsible adults but that they feel no one listens or acts. Article 25 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children who have been placed by the authorities for the purposes of care, protection or treatment have a right to a periodic review of the treatment provided to them and all other circumstances relevant to their placement. The right is the child’s but the responsibility to review the measures is that of the state.22 The Committee on the Rights of the Child says it is important to create, maintain high standards at state-run and non-state-run homes and monitor this in order to prevent children from ending up on the streets due to their right to support and protection not being fulfilled.23

The children we have met also describe, in addition to the shortcomings, mental ill-health, abuse and lack of information as reasons for going missing. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised that children seeking asylum must receive all relevant information about what they are entitled to, in their own language. They shall receive information about what services are available and about the asylum process so that they can have their voices heard and have their views taken into account.24 Every child also has a right to their highest attainable

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23 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 21 (2017) on children in street situations, point 47.

24 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, point 124.
standard of health, which includes support and help for those who are mentally unwell.25

Children do not feel they are involved in their placement
The municipality is responsible for the practical aspects of the reception of unaccompanied minors.26 Social services in the municipality the child is assigned to is responsible for investigating the needs of the child and deciding on a suitable placement.27 Regardless of which placement is being suggested, the child shall be kept informed and their opinions shall be taken into account.28 This is stated in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Social Services Act.29 In spite of this, many children describe how they have left their placements as they do not feel that they are involved or that they are listened to, either prior to or after the decision concerning placement.

According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, there is a requirement for the context in which the child exercises its right to be heard to be supportive and encouraging. This so that the child can be sure that the adult is willing to listen to and consider that which the child wants to say. It is the opinion of the Ombudsman for Children that the child’s fundamental right to be heard has not been fulfilled in those cases where children have been subjected to violence, threats and abuse but no responsible person has listened or no action has been taken. If the child is to be heard the person who listens to the child must also provide feedback directly to the child about the results and about how the child’s opinions have been taken into account.30 The best interest of the child shall be taken into specific consideration.31 In order to observe the best interest of the child when placing unaccompanied minors, the child’s individual needs must have been assessed and taken into account in the assessment. The Ombudsman for Children believes that the individual needs of unaccompanied minors need to be assessed prior to the first placement and that the assessment shall be conducted by a team of professionals such as social workers, psychologists and doctors.

Children we have met are of the opinion that social services and custodians should visit the home where they are placed more. This would provide them with a better understanding of the children’s situation. According to both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Social Services Act, care and placements of unaccompanied minors should be thoroughly followed up. This shall take place primarily through regular visits to the placement, private conversations with the child and private conversations with those who have accepted the child.32 The National Board of Health and Welfare’s general advice states that these visits should be made at least four times per year but that more frequent contact may be necessary with children who have recently been placed.33 The children’s stories do not indicate how many visits they have had from their social worker, but it is evident that they feel the number has not been sufficient and that the social workers have not understood the child’s situation and have thus not taken action as a result of any shortcomings. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that sporadic contact

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26 Since 1 April 2016, unaccompanied minors are assigned in accordance with an assignment model that involves each municipality being allotted a certain proportion of the total number of unaccompanied minors assigned over the course of the year. In those cases where there are strong ties to relatives or others close to the child in a municipality, the Migration Agency can assign the child to a municipality where they have ties. See https://ski.se/integrationssocialservice/socialservice/serviceprovision/barnochunga/placeradebarnochunga/ensamkommandebarnochunga/kommunensansvar,3425.html, accessed 15/10/2017.
27 For unaccompanied minors there is, in most cases, a voluntary placement in accordance with Chapter 4, Section 1 of the Social Services Act (2001:453), or a placement pursuant to Section 3 of the Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (LVU).
28 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2003), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 40.
29 Chapter 11, Section 100 of the Social Services Act (2001:453) and Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12.
30 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009), The right of the child to be heard, points 42 and 45.
31 Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 5, Section 2.
32 Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 6, Section 7 b.
33 National Board of Health and Welfare, Socialnämndens ansvar för barn och ungdom i familjehem, jourhem eller hem för vård eller boende (The social welfare committee’s responsibility for children and young people in foster homes, emergency foster homes or HBV homes), SOSFS 2012:11, Chapter 7, Section 3.
may lead to deficiencies in terms of legal certainty and the right the child has to review their treatment and placement.34 The Health and Social Care Inspectorate’s (IVO) supervisory report from 2016 confirms that there are deficiencies in the maintenance of legal certainty and that the children have not been able to meet with their social worker often enough.35

Children have told us that there has been violence and substance abuse in foster and network homes where they have been placed. When investigating whether a home is suitable as a foster home or network home, the social welfare committee conducts an assessment of the home’s general conditions for offering children and young people care that is secure, safe, purposeful and characterised by continuity. The social welfare committee shall pay particular attention to the presence of domestic violence, other crime, substance abuse or other circumstances in the potential home that may jeopardise a child’s safety and security.36 The children’s stories indicate that there have been serious failings in the assessments of foster and network homes’ suitability, with the presence of violence and abuse not having been detected. The children’s accounts are also confirmed by a decision of the Parliamentary Ombudsman (JO) in March 201737 and by the National Board of Health and Welfare’s analysis of the situation for unaccompanied minors.38 The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that the social welfare committee’s assessment of foster and network homes must be legally certain so that the social welfare committee is able to guarantee the child’s right to protection. In those cases where there is insufficient protection, we believe it as even clearer that the child’s right to be heard and have their contribution reviewed is not being ensured to a sufficient extent, which leads to children going missing.

Children who are placed in HVB homes and state-run residential homes have also signalled there are shortcomings in their placements prior to going missing. Children we have met and who have been taken into care pursuant to LVU, describe how they have been placed with coercion without understanding why and that they do not feel that their needs can be met at the placement. The same picture emerged when the National Board of Institutional Care (SiS) conducted a survey of the target group unaccompanied minors within compulsory care. The SiS survey also showed that there was a widespread perception among heads of department that unaccompanied minors have generally been placed on vaguer grounds that other groups, that the emergency placements become much too long term and are characterised by a too little transparency. In light of this, SiS argued that there is a need for better cooperation between the institutions and social services as a whole.39 The Ombudsman for Children shares the assessment that there is a need for better cooperation and takes a grave view of the signals that unaccompanied minors are being placed on vaguer grounds than other children. In 2010, we arranged a dialogue with municipalities in order to discuss how to ensure the reception of unaccompanied minors is acceptable and dignified. Even then, the municipalities pointed out that the home must be adapted to the individual and the importance of finding the right type of home to suit each child’s needs.40 The need for more adapted homes was also highlighted in the

34 Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 6, Section 7.
35 The supervisory report stated that the municipalities have had difficulties maintaining legal certainty, that there have been deficiencies in relation to information and support for unaccompanied minors, that the children need more information and support, that the child’s involvement prior to transfers has been insufficient and that children have been placed in homes that have not been investigated. See the Health and Social Care Inspectorate’s supervisory report 2016, pp. 35 ff.
36 National Board of Health and Welfare, Socialnämndens ansvar för barn och unga i familjehem, jourhem eller hem för vård eller boende (The social welfare committee’s responsibility for children and young people in foster homes, emergency foster homes or HVB homes), SOSFS 2012:11, Chapter 4.
38 National Board of Health and Welfare, Analys av situationen i socialtjänsten våren 2017 (Analysis of the situation in social services spring 2017), June 2017, pp. 19ff.
39 Kaunitz Catrine, Jakobsson Jenny, Ensamkommande barn och ungdomar placerade inom Sveriges institutionssysselsättning (SiS) (Unaccompanied minors and young people placed within the National Board of Institutional Care (SiS)), Socialmedicinsk tidskrift, Vol 93, No 1, 2016.
40 Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, Så härförbättrar kommunerna mottagandet av ensamkommande asylsökande barn – Rekommendationer från tio kommuner och Barnombudsmanen i en dialog den 8 december 2010 (This is how the municipalities improve the reception of unaccompanied minors – Recommendations from ten municipalities and the Ombudsman for Children in a dialogue on 8 December 2010), ref. no. 9.5:0874/10.
official report Barns och ungas rätt vid tvångsvård. Förslag till ny LVU (Children and young people’s rights in relation to compulsory care. Proposal for a new Care of Young Persons [Special Provisions] Act) from 2015.⁴¹ The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that cooperation must take place prior to the child being placed and wants to highlight that every child—regardless of whether they are unaccompanied—has the same right to a thorough assessment. In order to achieve this the child must be able to understand the purpose of the individually focused intervention and be involved in the process. We also make the assessment that the lack of adapted homes has probably led to several children ending up in state-run residential homes for young people even though another placement would have suited their needs better.

Social services use a method called Barns Behov i Centrum (Children’s Needs at the Centre, BBIC) in social care interventions pertaining to children.⁴² According to the National Board of Health and Welfare, several municipalities adhere to the BBIC structure in their administration of cases involving unaccompanied minors. However, the assessment needs to be adapted to the special situation unaccompanied minors find themselves in. The social worker conducting the assessment may, for example, need to use an interpreter and involve the custodian in place of the parents.⁴³ However, the unaccompanied minors’ accounts indicate that this method has not been used when assessing their individual needs. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that the two fundamental reasons why the match has not corresponded to the child’s needs are that the child’s needs have not been sufficiently assessed prior to placement and that there have not been adequate opportunities for an adapted placement. Some children have therefore been placed in homes that have not been able to meet their specific needs. The Ombudsman for Children’s annual report for 2017 suggested that state-run reception and investigation units should be established for the initial assessment of unaccompanied minors’ needs and that there is a need for several different types of placement. Children’s needs vary depending on their sex, age, whether they have been subject to severe trauma, abuse drugs, are involved in crime or have been in a vulnerable situation. Accordingly, there is a need for several types of placement where the staff have knowledge relevant to the target group.⁴⁴ Since such a suggestion entails an assessment prior to the long-term placement, the child may need to change custodian and public counsel if the placement involves moving. The Ombudsman for Children still believes that the advantages of establishing state-run assessment units outweigh the disadvantages. Based on the children’s accounts, our understanding is that they feel like responsibility for them keeps being passed around and that no one is prepared to meet their combined needs. Consequently, it is high time that state-run reception and assessment units and more adapted placements become a reality.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) also maintains that there is evidence to indicate that suitable reception circumstances are a key factor in preventing children from becoming victims of human trafficking, exploitation or going missing.⁴⁵ In this context, it is important to keep in mind that placed children who are born and raised in Sweden also go missing from their homes.⁴⁶ It is therefore necessary to look at research and interventions that concern all children within the social care system in order to see if there is anything that differs in terms of the reasons why unaccompanied minors and other placed children going missing. Viktoria Skoog is a social worker and has a PhD in social work. In her

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⁴² The visionary objective of BBIC is for children and young people who are being supported by social services to have the same life chances as all children and young people in society. National Board of Health and Welfare, Grundbok i BBIC - Barns Behov i Centrum (Basic Guide to BBIC – Children’s Needs at the Centre), 2015.
⁴³ NationalBoard of Health and Welfare, Ensamkommandebarn och unga – Handbok om socialnämndens ansvar och uppgifter (Unaccompanied minors and young people – Handbook on the responsibilities and duties of the social welfare committee), 2016, p. 22.
⁴⁴ Ombudsman for Children, We left everything behind - Voices of children and young people on the move, 2017, pp. 60 and 74.
⁴⁶ Yvonne Sjöblom, Tillfälligt uppbröt – om attrfämma eller kastas ut hemifrån, Lina berättar (Temporary breakup from home – young people tell their story), Save the Children, 2011.
thesis, *Moved around by social services - A study of the incidence and experience of instability for children in out-of-home care*, she describes how “breakdowns” in placements are common among teenagers. Her study states that the breakdowns studied were often initiated by the children themselves and that they had previously spoken of their dissatisfaction with the care. According to Skoog, this indicates that a breakdown can be seen as a way for children to take action when they feel that no one is listening to them. Skoog therefore stresses that signals from children and from homes indicating that the placement is not working out must be taken seriously.

The researchers Maria Heimer, Elisabet Näslund and Joakim Palmhe have investigated what importance children’s involvement in their social care cases has in relation to the protection and support they receive. Some of the results indicate that when the child is not allowed to express their views and given the opportunity to influence how the problem is described, the design of the intervention is not suitable for the problems that have emerged in the assessment. However, when the child is able to express themselves and has had the opportunity to influence how the problems are formulated, the intervention is better suited to the problems that have emerged during the assessment. The researchers argue that the child’s opportunities to influence how their problems are described increases the likelihood that the intervention will be well suited and that the child will have access to their social rights. The Ombudsman for Children agrees with the researchers’ conclusions. Investigating the child’s needs and allowing the child to be involved in describing their problems from the start can lead to more sustainable and better adapted placements, which prevents children from going missing.

Research indicates that the reasons behind a disappearance due to dissatisfaction with a placement may be the same, regardless of whether the child is unaccompanied or not. However, when it comes to interventions targeting the group unaccompanied minors, it is important to acknowledge that they may find it more difficult to make their voices heard as they do not have the same knowledge of their rights and the applicable rules in Sweden. It becomes clear that the reception process and the initial assessment prior to a placement is a decisive factor that can prevent children from going missing.

**Children who are transferred**

According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the ultimate goal of the reception process for unaccompanied minors is to find sustainable solutions that meet all the child’s needs for protection and take the child’s views into account. A couple of children we have met have lived in close to twenty placements in the short period they have been in Sweden. They describe how they have been moved around between foster homes, HVB homes and state-run residential homes for young people all over the country. Far away from friends, school and an established everyday life. When there are repeated transfers and departures children are not given the chance to create a secure everyday life. This often also means that the child’s custodian and social worker are far away and contact with them is more sporadic. Several children describe how they do not understand why they have to move or how they have not been asked. Multiple transfers create insecurity which in itself is a contributory factor to children going missing.

The National Board of Health and Welfare’s regulations state that care shall be secure, safe, purposeful and characterised by continuity. Continuity could mean avoiding unnecessary

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47 Skoog, Victoria, *Moved around by social services - A study of the incidence and experience of instability for children in out-of-home care*, Umeå University, 2013, p. 34.
49 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 79.
50 National Board of Health and Welfare, *Socialnämndens ansvar för barn och unga i familjehem, jourhem eller hem för vård eller boende* (The social welfare committee’s responsibility for children and young people in foster homes, emergency foster homes or HVB homes), SOSFS 2012:11, 26/06/2012, Chapter 3, Section 1.
transfers and ensuring that the child can maintain contact with the same social worker. Some children describe how they no longer know who their social worker is or that they have had very little contact after being transferred. According to the legislative history of the Social Services Act, the principle of continuity is based on the prerequisite that the child’s opportunities to build safe and trusting relationships forms the basis of a successful individual treatment process.52 Both the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the EU have stressed that unaccompanied minors should not have to move, unless this is in their best interest. This in order to guarantee continuity of care and to act in the best interest of the child.53 The children’s accounts indicate that transfers have occurred even when it has not been in the best interest of the child.

Prior to a decision is made to transfer a child pursuant to the Social Services Act, the custodian and the child must be asked their opinions.54 According to the Social Services Act, the social welfare committee’s interventions for the individual shall be implemented in cooperation with the person in question.55 The Parliamentary Ombudsman has pointed out that the child’s right to participation in the process is set aside when social services transfer placements without first having discussed the matter with the child and the custodian. Furthermore, the Parliamentary Ombudsman is of the opinion that a social welfare committee that decides to move a child without giving the child an opportunity to voice their opinion, does not have sufficient information to make an assessment of how the child may be affected by a move. In such cases, according to the Parliamentary Ombudsman, the committee is also lacking information on which to make an assessment of whether the new placement is able meet the child's needs.56 The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that the child’s fundamental right to participation and information is an important aspect of preventing unaccompanied minors from going missing.

**Being separated from relatives and friends**

Children also describe how they have been separated from their siblings without a good explanation. They talk about how they have been placed far away from family and close friends, which makes it more difficult to maintain close contact and important relationships. Some children describe how they have gone missing in order to find relatives in Sweden or in neighbouring countries. Some have, while searching for family, travelled to other countries and applied for asylum, but have been sent back to Sweden in accordance with the Dublin Regulation after having turned 18.

According to the Social Services Act, care shall be designed so that it promotes the individual’s sense of belonging to relatives and contact with their home environment.57 The legal requirements in relation to a sense of belonging and contact with the home environment do not pertain only to geographical proximity. Linguistic and cultural differences in views and backgrounds can also create great distance between people. It is of the utmost importance that these differences are taken into consideration when deciding on all placements, in particular when placing unaccompanied minors.58 According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the principle family unity means that siblings should not be separated when they are being placed.59 EU law also explicit states that siblings shall, as far as is possible, be kept together

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52 Government Bill 1979/80:1011 Social Services p. 213
53 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 40. EU law also states that unaccompanied minors shall change placements as rarely as possible; Article 31 of Asylum Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU); Article 24 of Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU). These directives are part of the EU's common asylum system and constitute a minimum level member states are obliged to maintain.
54 Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 11, Section 10.
55 Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 3, Section 5.
57 Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 6, Section 1, fourth paragraph.
58 Amendment to the Social Services Act, Govt Bill 1996/97:124 pp. 114–115. The authors use the term immigrant children. The Ombudsman for Children has instead chosen to use the term unaccompanied minors.
59 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 40.
when being placed, taking into account the best interest of the child as well as the child’s age and maturity.\textsuperscript{60}

Based on the children’s accounts, it appears that children find it difficult to keep in contact with people close to them when placed against their will. The legislative history of LVU pointed out that placing a child outside of their own home must not involve the child being cut off from contact with other people close to them that have emotional significance. The legislative history also pointed out that specific consideration may need to be given when placing refugee children or other children with a foreign background.\textsuperscript{61} When it comes to unaccompanied minors, the Migration Agency has a responsibility to try and find the child’s family members as soon as possible, regardless of where in the world they are.\textsuperscript{62} However, it is not stipulated in law how far the responsibility of the social welfare committee stretches regarding the contacts in these cases. It is our opinion that upon an initial assessment of the child’s individual needs, special consideration shall be given to the proximity and potential for good contact with family, relatives and significant adults close to the child. Children we have met describe how they have been separated from siblings and subsequently only received help with sporadic contact. The feeling of loss and the concern for their siblings have led to them going missing.

The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that if the child is separated from a sibling, social services, the custodian and staff from the home must encourage continued good contact to be maintained with the sibling and provide regular opportunities for the siblings to visit each other, if this is in the best interest of the child. We also find it worrying that some children feel they have not received sufficient support and help to find their relatives and we believe that greater efforts are needed to help and encourage reunions.

The environment in the children’s accommodation

Based on what the children describe, it is very important that they are integrated in society, with others in the home and that they have access to activities and school. Children describe their boredom and how difficult it is to maintain contact with people or create new social circles as they only sit in their rooms with nothing to do. They describe how they feel like time is standing still.

Under Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has a right to leisure, play and recreation suited to their age. The child also has a right to freely participate in cultural and artistic life. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has pointed out that municipalities should review the access provided to play and recreational facilities in order to guarantee equal accessibility for all groups of children.\textsuperscript{63} Each child must be given equal opportunities to enjoy the right to recreation. Special attention should, according to the committee, be directed at refugee children and asylum seekers.\textsuperscript{64}

There are no provisions in the Social Services Act or LVU that stipulate children and young people’s right to leisure. The Social Services Ordinance has provisions set out certain principles for the activities in HVB homes. These include that the activities shall be built on trust in and cooperation with the individual and be designed so that the time spent in the home is perceived as meaningful.\textsuperscript{65} The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that play and leisure should be included in this in order for the child to have the opportunity to feel like their stay in the home is meaningful.

\textsuperscript{60} Article 31 of Asylum Qualification Directive (2015/95/EU); Article 24 of the Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU).
\textsuperscript{61} Om vård i vissådana barn och ungdomar (On care in some cases of children and young people). Grev Boll 1989/90: 28 p.
\textsuperscript{63} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 17 (2013): The right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, art. 31), point 58 f.
\textsuperscript{64} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 17 (2013): The right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, art. 31), points 16 and 58 f.
\textsuperscript{65} Social Services Ordinance (2001:937), Chapter 3, Sections 3-8.
In 2010, the Ombudsman for Children met unaccompanied minors placed in HVB homes on the basis of a review of the situation for placed children. Even then, children who were placed in homes addressed the issue that they lacked meaningful activities and that they felt a strong sense of being isolated from society. In part, this could be because the HVB homes were located some way away from larger towns and the children described how they felt lonely and found it difficult to make contact with other people. At that time, the Ombudsman for Children proposed that the National Board of Health and Welfare establish guidelines in order to guarantee that all placed children and young people get the chance to have a meaningful everyday life and leisure time. Children would be given access to and have real opportunities to develop and be inspired by, for example, sport and culture.\(^{66}\)

For children placed in HVB homes or state-run residential homes for young people, the lack of activities seems to be a greater problem than for children placed in foster or network homes. The Committee on the Rights of the Child stresses that all institutions should offer space and opportunities for children to spend time with other children in the local community, to play and participate in games, physical activities and in cultural life and the arts. Such measures should not be limited to compulsory or organised activities. There is also a need for safe and stimulating environments in order to participate in free play and recreation.\(^{67}\) The National Board of Health and Welfare’s general advice states that those who manage an HVB home should especially consider and ensure that individuals placed in the home have their needs met, including the need for leisure activities.\(^{68}\) The inquiry into compulsory care for children and young people suggested that a provision should be introduced stipulating that those receiving care in a lockable unit shall be given the opportunity to spend time outdoors, engage in physical activities or other leisure activities.\(^{69}\) The inquiry also suggested that a child or young person receiving care outside of their own home shall be given the opportunity to take part in leisure activities that are adapted to their age and interests.\(^{70}\) The Ombudsman for Children approved both suggestions. The children’s voices indicate that these suggestions must be implemented swiftly.

The environment in the accommodation facility is something the unaccompanied minors we have met highlight as a factor that contributes to them going missing. Several of the boys we met describe how they feel discriminated against by staff in the home and by other adults because they come from another country or because they wish to practise their customs. They describe instances of abuse and how they do not feel safe.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that Sweden focus specifically on the prevention of discrimination and, when necessary, implement active measures in order to protect children in vulnerable situations, including children with a migration background.\(^{71}\) Information about the child’s right to practise certain customs, like Ramadan, and the need to be able to participate in their own culture have to be made clearer to the staff of homes and foster parents.

**Mental ill-health in an uncertain and long asylum process**

Children we have met describe traumatic memories from their country of origin, their journey and in Sweden. Combined with long waiting times and uncertainty about the future, this contributes to several of them suffering from mental ill-health. The mental ill-health may be a contributory cause of them going missing, and the disappearance itself may be a strategy for dealing with these emotions. It is also evident from the children’s accounts that they may go missing when they have not received care and love from adults around them. Unaccompanied

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\(^{67}\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 17 (2013): The right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts, art. 31, point 51.

\(^{68}\) National Board of Health and Welfare, HSLF-BS 2014:55, 31/05/2016, Chapter 2, Section 2.


\(^{71}\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Sweden (CRC/SWE/CO/5), point 16 b.
minors are different from other children in the social care system as they have no network in Sweden and are alone. Love and care is essential to a child’s development.

According to Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, each child has the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health. When implementing this right, states are responsible for ensuring that unaccompanied minors have the same access to healthcare as other children in the country. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that states should pay particular attention to the fact that unaccompanied minors have been separated from their family. The children have also, to varying degrees, experienced loss, trauma and violence and had their existence completely uprooted. The deep trauma experienced by many children affected requires a particular attentiveness and acknowledgement in connection with care and rehabilitation.72

The majority of children describe how they feel unwell and they also talk about the long waiting time in their asylum process. According to the Migration Agency, the average processing time for decisions concerning unaccompanied minors was 660 days in October 2017.73 The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted, after their visit to Sweden in autumn 2017, that cases concerning unaccompanied minors should be prioritised in Sweden, in order to avoid long waiting times that contribute to mental ill-health.74

The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that understanding the child’s background is key to making a successful and sustainable placement possible. The child’s background shall be looked at in relation to how the child is feeling physically and mentally at present. Performing this screening using a multidisciplinary team75 as early as upon the child’s arrival is therefore a key piece of the puzzle in terms of preventing mental ill-health and children going missing as a result. The inquiry into compulsory care for children and young people also highlights that when children and young people are placed outside their own home, it is of the utmost importance that the preceding assessment contains sufficient information about the child’s development, physical and mental status as well as their dental status. The purpose is to detect signs of ill-health and ensuring that the child receives the healthcare to which all children are entitled.76 In its analysis of the situation within social services in 2017, the National Board of Health and Welfare has established that unaccompanied minors generally have poorer health than the children who arrived prior to autumn 2015. The study shows that mental ill-health among unaccompanied minors is based on the children being worried about having their age adjusted upwards, worried about their 18th birthday, afraid of being deported and because they are worried about their relatives and their opportunities to apply for asylum in Sweden.77

The importance of providing children with mental ill-health with access to care at the right time and the fact that there are deficiencies in this support is something we drew attention to in the report Nyanlända barns hälsa (The health of recently arrived children) in 2017.78 During autumn 2017, we have also received indications of increased mental ill-health and a more widespread sense of hopelessness among unaccompanied minors and young people. The Ombudsman for Children therefore conducted a follow-up in autumn 2017 where we again

72 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005). Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, points 46 and 47.
74 Council of Europe, Country visit Sweden: move beyond emergency mode in migration-related areas to strengthen human rights, https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/sweden-move-beyond-emergency-mode-in-migration-related-areas-to-strengthen-human-rights, accessed 29/10/2017. At the time of writing, the commissioner’s full report following their visit to Sweden has not yet been published.
75 When using the term multidisciplinary team, we mean professionals with various skills that are relevant for making an initial assessment of the child’s needs, for example social workers, psychologists and doctors.
77 National Board of Health and Welfare, Analys av situationen i socialtjänsten våren 2017—fokus på ensamkommande flickor, yngre barn, nätverksplacerings samt suicidrisk (Analysis of the situation in social services spring 2017—focus on unaccompanied girls, younger children, network placements and suicide)—interim report 3, June 2017, p. 23.
78 Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, Nyanlända barns hälsa (The health of recently arrived children), 2017.
interviewed school nurses. Furthermore, we summoned municipalities, country councils and regions to talks that resulted in a number of proposed measures.\textsuperscript{79} It is our opinion that these measures need to be implemented without delay in order to prevent mental ill-health and thus also children going missing.

**Turning 18 and being rejected — or being considered an adult Support from social services ceases**

It is evident that the children we have met lack information about what will happen on the day they turn 18, have their age adjusted upwards or receive a rejection. For unaccompanied minors, turning 18 or having their age adjusted upwards means that the child’s custodian concludes their commission and social services’ responsibility for providing accommodation ceases.\textsuperscript{80} The young person is then treated as an adult in the asylum process. In purely practical terms, becoming an adult means that responsibility for reception is transferred to the Migration Agency.\textsuperscript{81} If help is needed with accommodation, it is possible to stay at one of the Migration Agency’s accommodation facilities, but the young person does not then have a right to choose where in the country they live. This may mean that the young person is forced to move away from friends and their school. In some cases, social services can offer an assisted living facility until the young person turns 21, if they have special needs.\textsuperscript{82} If a young person is to have their own accommodation following a placement, the National Board of Health and Welfare’s general advice stipulates that the board should meet the person’s needs of support and help with financial issues and with arranging accommodation, studies or work.\textsuperscript{83}

The National Board of Health and Welfare’s analysis of the situation within social services in 2017 established that social services often bring the placement to an end immediately when an unaccompanied minor turns 18 or has their age adjusted upwards, regardless of their need for care. The analysis also confirms that many young people who social services have concluded their contact with never arrive at the Migration Agency’s accommodation facilities. The young person chooses to sort out their accommodation themselves. The National Board of Health and Welfare states that this sometimes involves homelessness.\textsuperscript{84}

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has pointed out that placed children need to be transferred out of their placements at an appropriate pace. They also need support to find opportunities to support themselves, accommodation and, if needed, continued psychological support.\textsuperscript{85} The committee has also highlighted the importance of placed children who are nearing their 18th birthday being given the opportunity to finish their schooling.\textsuperscript{86} Many unaccompanied minors are left without specific support after turning 18, which leads to them going missing. This is also confirmed by the survey by the County Administrative Board of


\textsuperscript{80} Act (2005:420) on Custodians for Unaccompanied Minors.

\textsuperscript{81} Act (1994:137) on the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Others) Section 3.

\textsuperscript{82} National Board of Health and Welfare, Socialstyrelsens föreskrifter och allmänna råd om stödboende (The National Board of Health and Welfare regulations and general advice on assisted living facilities), HSLF-S 2016:5616-05-31, Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{83} As of 1 July 2017, the Government has decided on a temporary municipal grant of SEK 195m to support municipalities to allow unaccompanied minors who turn 18 during the asylum process remain where they are staying, see http://www.regeringen.se/artiklar/2017/07/fragar-och-svar-ensamkommande-som-yller-18-ar/, retrieved 28/11/2017.

\textsuperscript{84} National Board of Health and Welfare, Socialstyrelsens responsibilitet för barn och unga i familjehem, journem eller hem för vård eller boende (The social welfare committee’s responsibility for children and young people in foster homes, emergency foster homes or HVB homes), SOSFS 2012:11, Chapter 8.

\textsuperscript{85} National Board of Health and Welfare, Analys av situationen i socialtjänsten våren 2017 — fokus på ensamkommande flickor, yngre barn, nätverksplaceringar samt suidisk (Analysis of the situation in social services spring 2017 — focus on unaccompanied girls, younger children, network placements and suicide) — interim report 3, June 2017, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{86} \textbf{UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, point 54.}

\textbf{UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Joint general comment No. 4 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 23 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on State obligations regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration in countries of origin, transit, destination and return (2017), point 3.}
Stockholm from 2016. The young people describe how all actors who have supported and helped them since arriving in Sweden disappear overnight when they turn 18 or have their age adjusted upwards.

The importance of age assessments in a child-sensitive manner
Several of the young people we have met say that they are under 18 but that they have received a decision from the Migration Agency that they have had their age adjusted upwards. We know that some of them have been offered and gone through a medical age assessment. When assessing age, consideration must be taken to the child’s rights. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that the assessment must be conducted in a scientific, safe, child and gender-sensitive and fair manner. Any risk of violating the child’s physical integrity must be avoided.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights says that there are major differences between the age assessment methods applied in different EU countries. According to EU law, member states can use medical examinations, but these have to be conducted with full respect for personal dignity. A refusal to be subjected to an age assessment must not in itself lead to a rejection of the asylum application. If after the medical examination there are still doubts about the asylum seeker’s age, the basic premise shall be that the person is a minor.

In March 2017, Sweden started conducting medical age assessments in the asylum process and these are carried out by the National Board of Forensic Medicine (RMV). Of the forensic medical statements issued so far, the asylum seeker has been assessed as 18 years of age or older in approximately 80 per cent of cases. However, the method RMV is using is controversial. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that states should refrain from using medical methods based on bone and dental exam analysis. The committee says that such methods may be inaccurate, with wide margins of error, and can also be traumatic and lead to unnecessary legal processes. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that it is incredibly important that a child is not erroneously assessed to be an adult. Considering the proportion of young people who have told us they are under 18 but for various reasons have been unable to prove this, we think it is of utmost importance that the Government carefully monitor developments in this area. Age assessments must be conducted in a accordance with

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88 Prior to the asylum decision the Migration Agency performs an age assessment and the asylum seeker needs to submit acceptable written evidence that supports the claim that they are under 18. If there is no such documentation the asylum seeker is able to undergo a medical age assessment. The medical age assessment is one of several pieces of evidence the Migration Agency uses to assess the asylum seeker’s age. There is currently no medical method that can establish a person’s exact age but there are several methods of estimating age.
89 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2003), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 31.
90 FRA, Handbook on European law relating to the rights of the child, 2015, p. 175.
92 RMV’s method is partly based on a dental maturity assessment and on a bone maturity assessment. RMV applies the model that both teeth and knees must be immature for a person to be assessed as under 18. One of the grounds for using the method was that the National Board of Health and Welfare has stated that the knee joint matures significantly later than teeth. However, RMV’s statistics from 2017 indicate that it was more than four times likely for the knee joint to mature before the teeth, rather than the other way around. Even so, 38 percent of the boys/men who had been assessed to be adults had received that assessment based on the knee examination alone.
95 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Joint general comment No. 4 (2007) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 23 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on State obligations regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration in countries of origin, transit, destination and return (2017), point 4.
the rule of law and a holistic and multidisciplinary manner and in line with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.96

Rejection and the fear of being sent back
Some of the children we have met have received a decision for deportation that currently cannot be enforced as they are under 18. According to the Aliens Act, unaccompanied minors cannot be sent back without guarantees that the child will be accepted by a family member, an appointed guardian or a reception unit for children.97 The Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted that many unaccompanied minors are awarded temporary refugee status that expires when they turn 18, at the same time as there are few well-functioning repatriation programmes.98 The committee has also pointed out that the ultimate aim when dealing with unaccompanied minors is to find durable solutions that meet all the child’s needs for protection.99

However, as soon as a minor turns 18, has their age adjusted upwards or receive a rejection decision, the situation changes, the protection that existed until their 18th birthday disappears overnight. This also applies in relation to the right to support and accommodation.100 The fear of being sent back to what is being called their country of origin or having to look after themselves without assistance and support is one reason for why several of the children we have met disappear prior to their 18th birthday.

IVO has reported that unaccompanied minors have a great need for support in connection with having their age adjusted upwards and receiving a rejection as they do not have their legal guardians or other persons close to them in the country and often lack knowledge of the Swedish social system.101 The Ombudsman for Children agrees with this position. We are of the opinion that there is a need for long-term and systematic work with information to support children who become adults or receive a rejection, in order to prevent them going missing.

96 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 31.
97 Aliens Act (2005:716), Chapter 12, Section 3 a.
98 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 3.
99 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 39.
100 Since 1 June 2016, the right to assistance has ceased to apply to adults when a rejection decision or deportation decision has become legally binding or when the time limit for voluntary return has run out (see the Act (1994:137) on the Reception of Asylum Seekers and Others). This means that the right to a daily allowance and asylum accommodation ends. The fear of turning 18 in combination with a rejection decision is therefore great.
101 Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO), Supervisory report 2016, p. 16.
Interview: Eva Harnesk

Eva Harnesk is a psychologist and is responsible for Save the Children’s helpline for unaccompanied minors in Sweden. The helpline opened in November 2015 and is available in several different languages.

Eva Harnesk says that the most common reason why children and young people phone Save the Children’s helpline is to talk about the asylum process. “The children don’t really understand it and they also have to wait a very long time for a decision”, she says.

Their living conditions are also something the children talk a lot about. It may be that they want to live somewhere else, for example closer to a relative, but the children also talk about real shortcomings in the accommodation facilities:

“There are those who have a custodian who cares about them or the home they are in has great staff who they can talk to, but unfortunately we hear all too often about staff who can be racist and even violent. Completely unacceptable treatment.”

Eva Harnesk says that mental ill-health is also the topic of many phone calls. It may involve the children having given up, having trouble sleeping, feeling low and having lost hope:

“Our helpline opened in November 2015 and at that time we had many calls about ‘when can I start school?’, ‘when do I get a custodian?’, they phoned us to get help getting things started. But now there is much more resignation: ‘Does is matter if I go to school, I won’t get to stay anyway’ and ‘What does it matter if I know Swedish if I’m being sent back to Afghanistan anyway’.”

So what do you say to the children?

“First of all, we think it is really important to talk about how you are feeling and why. We try to help the young people put things into perspective, that it is an unbelievable burden to wait. We try to help them understand that this is a fairly normal reaction to a fairly abnormal situation. It may help the young people a lot if we get them to understand that they are not abnormal.”

Do any of those who phone you tell you that they have considered leaving the home or have done so already and are living as missing persons?

“Yes, we have mainly had young people who went missing due to the situation in the home they were in. Because there has been fights and conflict and they have been afraid of other young people. But they have also gone missing because the staff have been so nasty. In those cases, they have instead stayed with friends or drifted about. We have also had a number of children who have been sleeping rough. In those cases, we have worked on trying to make them get back in contact with social services.”

Some of the children we have talked to express distrust of authorities, is that something you have experienced as well?

“Yes. It is something that may also make the asylum process more difficult. We had a boy who is homosexual but did not want to tell the Migration Agency as he was afraid that information would make its way to Afghanistan. We then tried to explain that it is important to disclose this in order to get a correct assessment of his grounds for asylum. There are a lot of adults in the room and these children are not really used to trusting adults and authorities. I think it’s important to know that they do not really trust authorities and that it takes time to gain this trust. This lack of trust also increases when they are made to wait a long time for decisions, are being placed in bad homes and are forced to move several times.”
Based on what children are telling you, what are the most important changes that you think need to be made in order to ensure that the children’s rights are met?

“In light of the current situation in Afghanistan, these young people should not be deported until it becomes clearer that they will be received in an organised manner and that we are sure that their home country is safe.”

“The transition from 17 to 18 must be smoother and more natural, young people must be allowed to stay in the municipality where they have been placed and where they go to school. This is also a major reason why they go missing. They are in a home where they have lived for a long time and have made friends and then when they turn 18 they must suddenly move to adult accommodation somewhere else in Sweden.”

“We also think that adults in close proximity to these children need to have more knowledge and expertise concerning crises and trauma, so that they understand that it takes some time for these young people to talk about the difficult things they have gone through.”
Life as a missing person

In our conversations with unaccompanied minors and young people, it has been important to try to understand how they have been living since going missing. We already knew that these children had been in a difficult situation, but their stories bear witness to a far more vulnerable situation and far more exploitation than we had previously been aware of. The situation of the children and young people who have lived or live on the streets is particularly alarming, where their everyday life often features exploitation, crime and drugs. The Ombudsman for Children finds it unacceptable that children are living under these circumstances in Sweden.

Some children cannot talk about everything that has happened during their time as missing persons in Sweden, they become sad and choose not to talk about it. Other children tell us about events that are so horrific it is hard to understand they are sitting in front of us today.

The children tell their stories

The girls and boys we have met have made their way to Sweden on their own, searching for a better life. They are escaping persecution, unrest and war. Some unaccompanied minors describe a life of poverty, abuse and vulnerability. After arriving in Sweden, they have all been placed in a home by social services but, for various reasons, the children have gone missing.

A daily struggle to survive

When we meet Rana, she has been living as a missing person for two years. Since she went missing, Rana has been living with a distant relative and worked there as a domestic helper in exchange for a roof over her head.

She describes the feeling she lives with every day:

“Like I’m nothing. I’m at home all the time, I can’t go out, I can’t do anything. I can’t go to school, I can’t work or support myself.”

Most children we have met have spent all or parts of their time on the streets. They describe how they have gone without food for several days, how they do not have clothes that are suitable for the weather or that they lack more or less all basic necessities.

“I slept on the street, sometimes I didn’t eat for three or four days. They were hard times, I can tell you. I wasn’t well back then. It was a long time, I was out of the home for about two and a half months”, Khalid says.

Khalid is not the only one not to have eaten for several days. One girl says she lost 20 kilos during her time on the streets. Her custodian did not recognise her when she came back.

Children describe in detail how they have been sleeping on the streets, in churches, in tents, in cars, in caravans, on beaches, in the forest, on park benches, in stations, in bus shelters, in strangers’ homes or with casual acquaintances. Other children describe how they have just wandered around at the night time because they are scared to lay down to sleep. They are afraid of being taken advantage of or injured.

Life as a missing person is difficult and leaves an impression. Worry, anxiety, sorrow, difficulty sleeping, pain, poor appetite and nightmares are recurrent features in the accounts. Several children say that they have been ill but have not dared to seek healthcare, or that they have been denied care. Self-harming behaviour, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts feature in many accounts. This can involve the child themselves, but also their friends. Several children talk about friends who have committed suicide but also about their own suicide attempts.

“I had petrol with me as I was going to set myself on fire, but I was arrested by the police. I was accused of intending to set something else on fire”, says Kassim.

The children themselves often make a connection between the way they feel and their life situation. Bader says that he does not know what he has to do to make his life better:

“[From] when I opened my eyes when I was born until now, it’s just sadness and difficulties and only terrible things. So this situation I have ended up in all the time, it just gets worse and worse. And I don’t know, what shall I do? I feel [that] I can’t do anything about it.” Fares says that he travelled on trains between different cities after running away from his accommodation. He saw Swedish young people travelling with their parents. It raised a lot of thoughts:
“They have security. They have everything, opportunities around them. But I, I have no one.”
Some of the children say that while they were missing, they have been to several different
countries before returning or being sent back to Sweden. Sinan talks about why he first left
Sweden:
“I said that like, maybe there’s hope for me, because I still have hope. So I just moved to
Denmark and from there to Germany, from Germany to Belgium.”
Sinan is not alone in leaving Sweden in the hope that it will perhaps be easier to gain asylum
somewhere else. Other children say that they were not happy in Sweden or that they wanted to
be reunited with relatives or other important people. Nuhad went to one of Sweden’s
neighbouring countries to apply for asylum and be with his brother. He ended up staying there
for a while at a refugee facility there but was subsequently sent back to Sweden. His brother
remains in the neighbouring country.

Contact with authorities and adults
Several children say that they have not been contacted by the home, social services or their
custodian while they have been missing, even though they have kept their mobile phones with
them. Some describe how they did not have much contact with their custodian or social services
before going missing, or that their relationships with them were bad. This did not change after
they went missing. Children also describe feeling abandoned by the adults who are supposed to
be responsible for them.

Some say that they have been in contact with social services or their custodian while they
were missing in order to get help with correcting the shortcomings that led to them going
missing. Yazid moved in with a close relative after having run away from the home where he
was unhappy. Yazid informed responsible adults that he had gone missing but says that he still
got no response from the adults who were responsible for him:
“After I came here my teacher tried to talk to the municipality and social services. It didn’t
help. My relative tried to talk to them, it didn’t help. We tried all the time to get a phone number
for the manager, they refuse to give it out. I contacted my custodian but he also said, ‘I can’t do
anything’.”

Since many of the children we met have lived on the streets while they were missing, many
of them talk about contact with the police and security guards. Some describe fear, they are
vigilant and try to avoid the police. They talk about language difficulties that lead to
misunderstandings and worry when the police and security guards intervene and detain them.
Naayab had no ticket when he came to Sweden by train. He talks about how two security
guards threw him to the floor when he did not understand what they were saying. Naayab
describes the feeling when one of the guards lay on top of him.

“And he was very heavy as well. And because he pushed in the stomach I couldn’t breathe
and at the same time he held me like this and he tried to put his hand on my face and then I
tried to explain that he must take his hand away. But he didn’t understand what I was saying.”
Nuhad talks about his experience of meeting police officers around town:
“Like, they’re not very nice. Them [the police] on the streets don’t understand anything. They
say to you ‘where is your ID or your papers?’ And they ask strange questions. ‘Where did you
come from? Which country were you in before coming to Sweden? We will send you back
directly to the country you came from.’”

However, such bad experiences of meeting the police are not universal. One girl was very
scared of the police, but it was them who finally helped her get out of the difficult situation she
was in. She had been exploited by adults on the streets for a long time. She finally confided in a
woman who was nice to her. This led to a police operation and to her receiving protection and
support.

The majority of the children do not attend school while they are missing, but some keep in
contact with school. For several children, the school staff have been a great support while they
have been missing. They have reacted to and taken action to change the child’s situation. Emir
says:
“When I tell my story to, for example, teachers they get very sad. When I tell them about my life they say, ‘the life you have gone through is really hard’.”

Other adults play an important role
Non-profit organisations can play an important role in the children’s lives. The children tell us they receive food, help with homework, somewhere to live, legal advice and emotional support via these organisations. Some also say that they have been supported when coming into contact with authorities by being accompanied by an adult. Children and young people say that they appreciate it but that the non-profit organisations cannot always do very much to affect the situation. One boy says:

“Even though they tell us about the law and everything and grounds for asylum and such, but our questions, we get no answers to them. But they don’t know about it. And they want to help us, but they don’t know how to help us.”

Children describe how they become dependent on other people, regardless of whether they want to or not.

“The streets, like you have to have friends in order to survive on the streets. You must have friends exactly all of the time. If you lose someone, something will happen to you, something serious”, Asim says.

Several children say that private individuals have been a great help to them. It was like that for Kassim. He was sitting in the city centre being sad. A stranger came up to him. It turned out the stranger came from the same country.

“And I said that I was Afghan, and after that we talked to each other and then he gave me his number and said that if I needed help with anything I should phone him. When he started his life here he had experienced the same problems. So he was there to help me.”

Nuhad appreciates being able to work as he is afraid of getting caught not paying his bus fare and get deported.

“I volunteer in order to get a bus pass, a monthly pass. I go there from Monday to Friday.”

Support from adults who do not have any official responsibility is incredibly important. Support from responsible adults has often been lacking and the children need help, support and care. The adults that have been there for them are mentioned time and again in these accounts and they are often still in contact with these people.

Unfortunately, not all adults have good intentions. Children also say that they have sought support and help from strangers and that it has led to them coming into contact with people who have hurt or exploited them.

An existence characterised by drugs and crime
“Like if you don’t have food and there is no one to tell you that ‘come, you can do this and then you’ll be paid for this and that’, what are you to do? Yes, then you steal”, says Akram.

Several children mention crime on the streets in their accounts. We understand that some of them have committed crimes, because that is the reason for their current placement, but they often do not want to talk about it. The crimes were committed when they were in a very difficult situation. The children know that they cannot steal, rob or sell drugs, but their situation has been so difficult and unbearable that they felt they had no choice. Bahah describes it as follows:

“You have to shoplift or do something bad, or deal drugs as it’s a must. To get money and survive. Sometimes you have no chance. And sometimes there might be a robbery, sell drugs, steal clothes, sell clothes again.”

Children talk about how life as a missing person involves risks. A boy tells us what can happen when you are looking for a roof over your head.

“So it can start when you’re looking for accommodation, but you don’t know where you’ll end up. You like get advice from adults who want to use young people to sell different stuff. It’s not just drugs but there’s lots to sell in Stockholm in order to support yourself for sleep in these places. I’ve been asked if I want to sell drugs and get paid well too, but you end up immediately with the police all the time. I know lots of young people who sell drugs and stuff to support themselves. Because they have no other options.”
Some children describe how criminal networks and the Mafia exploit children who live on the streets. Baahir for example, he runs errands for other people for money.

“People give me this thing, ‘you’re to give it to this person, you’ll get about 300’. I get it from this person, I get 300, buy drugs with my money…”

Almost all the children say that they have either seen or know about the drug trade on the streets, even those children who have not ended up on the streets themselves. Some children are careful to emphasise that they have not used drugs themselves while others say that they have. Several children describe how they have started using drugs in their country of origin or during the long journey to Europe. Kaden describes how drugs have been a way to cope with life on the streets:

“If I had had documents, an ID and something to do, I wouldn’t have ended up with a drug problem, not ended up on the streets, trouble. You take drugs to forget your problems. You want to think about your family, what you’ll do in the future.”

At the same time, children and young people describe how they struggle to avoid crime and drugs and to find other ways to support themselves, even when living on the streets. For several boys it was the hope of avoiding a life of drugs and crime that made them leave their country of origin. Baahir says he is afraid of becoming caught up in crime:

“This is an easy way to become a criminal. It’s super easy, it’s really easy. Like, you become a criminal, like at once. But becoming a good person, that takes time. And that’s where like, I say, it’s enough, I don’t want to go down this path.”

**The children bear witness to violence and the sex trade**

During our meetings, we have heard many accounts of how the children have been subjected to physical and mental violence and abuse while they have been missing. Both girls and boys describe sexual exploitation and how they have sold their bodies to get money for food or accommodation. Aasim describes how he was exploited when he looked for help:

“Various things I need, I’ve met someone who wants to help me. And I know I’ve been used for sex, like.”

Baahir talks about adults who buy sex from children on the streets:

“It happens here in Stockholm too. Some old men come up to boys, he knows, ‘Moroccans, they have no money’. So they say: ‘I’ll pay you, comewith me’. Some women, they know Moroccans, they have been with them for a long time. So they come and pay money to them to make her pregnant.”

Baahir says that he has seen men offer money to a young boy and that he tried to convince the boy not to go with them. He did not succeed. He says that for someone living on the streets it is tempting to say yes to being paid for sex. The boy explained:

“He gave me money, this old man, and that’s why I’m going with him. I’m going to shower with warm water, I’m going to sleep with him in a bedroom, so what?”

One girl was not able to tell us what happened, but says:

“And they also did things to me. I was pregnant when I came back.”

These stories are just some of those that bear witness to how the children have been exploited for sexual purposes by adults in Sweden. During our relatively short conversations a large number of children bring up sexual exploitation.

However, there are also some children who explicitly point out that they would rather die than sell their bodies, although they know that it happens and that some have no choice. One young person describes how you do anything for a place to sleep when you are homeless:

“You’ll do it straight away, regardless of the consequences, dangerous or not. You give me a place to stay, I’ll give you what you want. For the young people, I don’t know what will happen to them, but for the girls, I don’t know, absolutely they will be raped and they will sell their bodies.”
**Lelah’s story**

During her journey through Europe, Lelah was exploited by human traffickers. When she arrived in Sweden, the human traffickers encouraged her to tell the Migration Agency that she was over 18. But she was only 16.

Even though the Migration Agency was suspicious of her story, Lelah was treated as an adult in the asylum process. She was placed at an adult accommodation facility, but went missing when she was to be sent back to the EU country in which she first arrived. After going missing, she was forced to sell sex on the streets to survive and to pay the traffickers. Lelah says that she was exploited for sexual purposes both before and during the time she was missing.

“I was walking the streets every day. I rented a room from a woman who knew the traffickers. I had to pay rent with what I made, then I also gave some to the traffickers”, she says.

An adult who met Lelah on the street thought that something seemed wrong and contacted social services. Lelah could no longer cope with a life being controlled by the traffickers. She received help from the police and social services:

“The police picked me up on the street so that everyone could see. They did it so that the traffickers wouldn’t think I had escaped. The police said they would take me to a safe place.”

Lelah is currently living under protection but is still threatened by the human traffickers.

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**The Ombudsman for Children’s analysis**

**Analysis of the children’s voices**

Both girls and boys have listened to describe homelessness, a lack of food and clothing, exploitation and poor health. These accounts clearly show that life as a missing person is hard. Most of the children have spent all or large parts of their time on the streets. Some have gone to stay with friends or relatives and others have gone abroad. The children who have been on the streets talk about suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and about friends who have committed suicide. When some tell us that life as a missing person, in spite of everything, is still a less bad option than what they ran away from, we understand that there are serious failings in their previous placements. The children describe how they find themselves in a very difficult situation where they feel that Sweden has not understood their grounds for asylum. Some also say that they go missing due to a fear of being sent back.

Some describe how they are not aware that anyone has been looking for them while they were missing; not social services, not the home, not their custodian. Some children who have made contact with responsible adults have felt that they are met with a lack of commitment or a lack of willingness to help them with the problem that caused them to go missing. Others describe how police and school staff have tried to understand their situation and supported them, and that this felt good. The children say that they have often felt alone and abandoned by responsible adults. We also understand that other adults, for example school staff or healthcare personnel, who do not actually have any responsibility as regards the specific situation have still tried to help and that they have appreciated this.

Even though there are accounts of representatives of authorities who have supported and helped, often it is private individuals and representatives of non-profit organisations who the children describe as being important to them while they were missing. In addition to practical support with accommodation, food and other things, the children describe how these private individuals provide warmth and emotional support. Private individuals and non-profit organisations take on a great deal of responsibility and fill gaps that really should not exist. Based on the children’s stories, it is also clear that help is sometimes offered by people who take advantage of the children’s vulnerable situation.

The Ombudsman for Children has been party to horrible descriptions of abuse and exploitation for various purposes. They describe how they have been offered help by friendly adults but how they have subsequently been exploited. Based on the children’s accounts, it appears impossible to know whether the person who is offering help will also demand something in return. A number of children have felt forced to take that risk in order to obtain
food or accommodation. This clearly indicates that the resources set aside for finding, protecting and helping children who live on the streets are insufficient.

Children talk about how they have dealt drugs, how they have performed housework in exchange for somewhere to stay or how they have been exploited by criminals. We find it remarkable that the children tell us about so much vulnerability on the few occasions we have met them. They are short conversations and the children have never met us before. But we are aware that when children feel that there is a meaningful purpose, they see it as important to talk.102

When children and young people talk about crime and drugs, we understand that this is not a situation in which they thought they would end up. Many have fled in order to get away from such a life. Some say they have committed crimes and that they are ashamed of it but at the same time, they believed that the situation they were in left them with no choice. Consequently, children can be both victims and perpetrators. The fact that the children are using drugs can be described as both a reason to go missing from the home but also a result of the hard life on the streets. Some talk about drugs as something they need.

Unaccompanied minors’ voices about the period they were missing clearly point to the existence of a dark underbelly of society involving crime, drugs and exploitation and where the children are the victims. It is a very serious situation that takes place on Swedish streets where we need to take action promptly to get all children away from life on the streets.

**Analysis based on the rights of the child**

The children’s accounts reveal that, while they are missing, they are subjected to abuse and exploitation, commit crimes and experience both physical and mental ill-health. According to Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, each child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health and Sweden is responsible for ensuring that unaccompanied minors have the same access to healthcare as other children in the country.103 Every child also has the right to protection against violence and the right to the standard of living required for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.104 It is evident from our meetings with children that children who have been living on the streets have not had their rights ensured.

**Authorities’ responsibilities when children go missing**

Several children we have met have made contact with social services or their custodian in order to get help to return to their placement, but have felt rejected and not listened to. The problems in the home that led to them going missing have not been remedied, which makes them feel that it is not possible for them to return. Insufficient involvement and a lack of trust in authorities results in the children not returning. Few children are aware of anyone looking for them while they are missing. On the basis of the children’s voices, it is difficult to discern whether this is because no one has actually been looking for them or because the children are not aware of the efforts made.

Previous surveys have come to the conclusion that it is unclear which actor is responsible for taking action and looking for children who have gone missing.105 There are many actors who have responsibilities pertaining to an unaccompanied minor and the Ombudsman for Children

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103 Health and Medical Services Act (2017:30), Chapter 8, Section 1; Health and Medical Care for Asylum Seekers and Others Act (2008:344) Section 6.

104 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, points 46–47.

105 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 27.

106 County Administrative Board of Stockholm, *På flykto och försvunna — En nationell kartläggning av ensamkommande barns och avvikar* (Lost in Migration — A National Survey of Missing Unaccompanied Minors), 2016:25, pp. 68–69.
believes that the structures through which they cooperate need to be made clearer in order to allow the child to be reported missing and a search for them to be initiated as quickly as possible. The relevant actors, all of whom have a responsibility when an unaccompanied minor goes missing are: staff of the home/foster parents, social worker, custodian and the police. In addition, there are school staff and healthcare personnel, as well as the Migration Agency. All children who go missing must be looked for. According to the normalisation principle, the custodian should have principal responsibility of reporting an unaccompanied minor missing. The Ombudsman for Children therefore suggests that the custodian should have a statutory responsibility to report the child as missing to the police within 24 hours. It is often the staff of the home who discover that the child has gone missing and we therefore think it is important that procedures are established at the regional level in order to ensure that information about the missing child reaches the custodian.

The County Administrative Board of Stockholm has established a regional cooperation plan with the aim of acting in a more coordinated manner and more swiftly when an unaccompanied minor goes missing. The procedure has been produced jointly by all actors and, as a result, it is clear when one actor’s responsibility is transferred to another. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that similar regional procedures need to be established all over the country. These procedures should be evaluated and updated annually and shall be based on functions and not individuals in the region.

When a child is reported missing, the police take over formal responsibility for conducting efforts to find the child. However, as long as the social welfare committee has not concluded the child’s case, the social worker continues to have a responsibility to maintain contact with the child. For example, the police in Stockholm undertake outreach efforts on the streets together with social services’ emergency unit. This work gives them a unique opportunity to find and meet children who have gone missing or are live as missing persons. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recently published a general comment concerning children who are living on the streets. Among other things, the committee states that additional training in methods pertaining to the rights of the child and psychosocial support is required for professionals who work with children who are living on the streets. This may apply to, for example, social workers who work on the streets or specialist units within the police service.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child also maintains that children living on the streets are a particularly vulnerable group. According to the committee, there is often no systematic collection of data, which means that the number of children living on the streets is unknown. The problems surrounding deficient collection of statistics in Sweden leads to these children becoming invisible and the measures implemented being short-term or temporary. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that substantial effort need to be made throughout the country when it comes to searching and outreach work. Each child who goes missing from a social care placement must be seen as a child in a seriously vulnerable situation without protection. Accordingly, the effort devoted to finding the child must be greater and faster than is currently the case.

Most of the children we have met have spent all or large parts of their time as missing persons living on the streets. They often stay in larger cities and in public places. The outreach

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108 The same rules should apply to all children within Sweden’s borders (see Mottagande av ensamkommande barn [Reception of Unaccompanied Minors], Govt Bill 2005/06:46, p. 41.
110 Social Services Act (2001:453), Chapter 11, Section 7
112 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 21 (2017) on children in street situations, CRC/C/GC/21, point 18.
113 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 21(2017) on children in street situations, CRC/C/GC/21, points 7 and 28.
activities that the police and the City of Stockholm conduct, and the organisations that work in the field point out that it takes a long time to build up trust among the target group. Continuity is therefore an important factor.1^ Some of the children we have met appreciate it when police officers acknowledge them and try to help them, although this involves balancing their fear of the power and demands of the border police, for example.1^ Consequently, not all children or young people want to be found by the authorities. Some of those we have met remain in hiding, for example due to having received rejection decisions. The children who are hiding from the authorities, in particular, are living in a very vulnerable situation and are in need of help and support. Regardless of the reasons why they have gone missing, the child must get off the streets as quickly as possible. This environment is so high risk that it is the Ombudsman for Children’s opinion that children cannot be allowed to live there at all.

When children no longer have contact with authorities, civil society and private individuals take on a great responsibility, according to the accounts. Some children say that they have difficulty making contact with authorities who are supposed to help them. The children describe how they do not know what they are entitled to, or how they do not understand the authorities. In some cases, organisations or private individuals have helped and come with them to tell the child’s story. The Ombudsman for Children thinks this indicates that the authorities need to improve their treatment of unaccompanied minors who have gone missing and also be more helpful, as well as explaining the rights and informing the children to a greater extent.

**Vulnerability, crime and exploitation**

The Committee on the Rights of the Child highlights how unaccompanied minors run a greater risk of falling victim to, for example, sexual exploitation and abuse than other children.1^ This risk is clearly evident from children and young people’s accounts of the time they were missing. Every child has the right to be protected against all forms of violence in accordance with Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and also specifically against all forms of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and human trafficking in accordance with Articles 34 and 35 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to these provisions, Sweden has an obligation to take all appropriate measures in order to prevent exploitation and all forms of trafficking of children.1^5

Based on the children’s descriptions of how they have been exploited, it appears as if a significant proportion of them have been victims of crime while they were missing. This may involve crimes such as sexual exploitation and human trafficking.1^6 At the European level, there are several networks that aim to combat sexual exploitation of children and human trafficking of children, respectively.1^7 The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings states that victims of crimes shall be protected without discrimination due to, for example, national or social origin and that special measures shall be taken to reduce children’s vulnerability to human trafficking, for example by creating a protective environment for them.1^8

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1^3 Internal control of aliens - The work of the police also includes an obligation to conduct ‘internal control of aliens’ within Sweden’s border. This involves the police checking that a foreigner has the legal right to be in Sweden. In order to conduct such a check, there needs to be grounds to presume that a person does not have the legal right to stay here or that there are other special reasons for the check, see https://polisen.se/om-polisen/specialkompetenser/Granspolisen/, retrieved 29/10/2017.

1^4 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 3.

1^5 In 2009 Sweden ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Govt Bill 2005/06:68. The optional protocol sets out in detail the state’s responsibility to protect each child against all forms of sexual exploitation.

1^6 Penal Code, Chapter 4, Section 9 and Chapter 6.


1^8 Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, CETS 197, Articles 3 and 28.3

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In a report presented recently, the European Commission states that human trafficking involving children is one of the fastest growing trends within the EU. Of the 15,846 reported cases of human trafficking in 2013 and 2014, at least 2,375 victims were children.\textsuperscript{119} The street environment is not a suitable environment for anyone, especially not for unaccompanied minors.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasises that the human, social and financial costs of denying children their right to protection against violence are enormous and unacceptable.\textsuperscript{120} In order to identify risk factors for individuals and for groups of children, it is necessary for everyone who comes into contact with children to be aware of the risk factors and indicators for all forms of violence. It also requires those who deal with children to have been given guidance on how to interpret these indicators and to have the necessary knowledge, willingness and ability to act in a suitable manner, including providing emergency protection.\textsuperscript{121}

It is clear that the situation for the unaccompanied minors who have gone missing from their accommodation is very serious and associated with great risks. Few of the children have relatives or other contact networks in the country, which means that they are dependent on the help strangers can provide or to simply live on the streets. Sweden has been chosen as a pathfinder country within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’s work to combat violence against children.\textsuperscript{122} The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that unaccompanied minors who go missing and are living on the streets are a group that should be observed as part of this work.

\textsuperscript{119} Report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings (2016), COM (2016) 267 final, p. 19. Age information was not available for all registered victims and the number of children may therefore be higher.

\textsuperscript{120} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13 (2011). The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, point 16.

\textsuperscript{121} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13 (2011). The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, point 48.

\textsuperscript{122} http://www.endviolence.org/, accessed 31/10/2017.
Children and young people from North Africa

The children tell their stories

It is common for the children we have met to have spent time on the streets while missing. This is often an entirely new and foreign environment to them. However, boys from Morocco and Algeria are different in that they describe how they have spent large parts of their childhood on the streets. They say themselves that they live on the streets.

Most boys we have met with a background in Morocco or Algeria describe how they were forced onto the streets in their countries of origin. Badru says:

“... My dad has beaten me up and stuff. That’s why I ran away from home and lived on the streets.”

Badru was subjected to violence at home and could not stay there. He says that his dad drank and beat up him and his mother.

Eben describes another reason:

“I have been little and my dad he died and when dad died he left me alone and that’s why I cannot know how old I was when I left the country.”

Baahir says that it is common for children to be given up as infants if they are born out of wedlock:

“They do that like, in Morocco, women cannot have children before they are married. If she has a child before being married her family may kill her. For real like. Not joking (...) and then when she has a baby she throws it out. She has to. She goes to another city and then after when she’s pregnant, when she has a baby, she leaves it on some road, like that, she leaves, then she goes back to her family. That’s what happens in Morocco. That’s why there are lots of street kids, like loads of them.”

The reason for leaving their country of origin has been to get away from life on the streets and get a better life.

“I thought that there is only one way. And so, that’s Europe. So I’ve dreamt of sorting out a good life there”, says Baahir.

Homelessness often continues in Europe. “There are a lot of problems on the way. You don’t have money, there is no food. From one city to another. You know you go on a bus and from bus to train and so on. And in between you live on the street and sleep on the street. You don’t have a home”, Badru says.

Aasim says that he left his country when he was only 11 years old. Eben does not know how old he was:

“I can’t write or read or count. I don’t know figures and that, so I can’t say exactly how old I was when I left the country. I ran away from home to Tangier where there are many boats and tried to go to Spain. So I’ve been on the streets in Morocco too. But I had never thought I’d end up on the streets here in Stockholm.”

The Ombudsman for Children’s analysis

Analysis of the children’s voices

On the basis of the North African children’s accounts, we understand that one reason for them having left North Africa is that they want to get away off the streets. They have often left their homes at an early age due to bad conditions or because they have lost one or both parents. They have gone onto the streets in big cities in their country of origin. They have tried to support themselves there as best they can through temporary work, begging or by committing crimes. They talk about a lack of food, drugs, crime and violence. The children describe a vicious circle and a situation in which they cannot find a way out or any alternatives to life on the streets. In the hunt for a better life, they end up in Sweden.

The children say that when they came to Sweden they were hoping for something different, with a dream of a residence permit and of living in a family. When reality in Sweden does not live up to these expectations, it is our understanding that the dreams are shattered. Many end up on the streets again. Perhaps the tough environment is one they are familiar with and where
they can feel a sense of belonging. Children and young people we have met say they have been told that unaccompanied minors from North Africa never get to stay in Sweden.

**Analysis based on the rights of the child**

Based on the children’s accounts, it is clear that the group North African children are significantly more likely to live on the streets than other groups of children. In its general comment on children in street situations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child challenges the convention states to adopt holistic and long-term strategies and to allocate the necessary funds for these children. Furthermore, states are recommended to prevent the violation of the child’s rights and to prevent their options being restricted by them being forced to live on the streets and to simultaneously promote and protect the rights of those children who are already living on the streets.\(^\text{131}\)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child describes how children living on the streets are often suspicious when adults intervene in their lives. Previous abuse by adults has made them unwilling to give up the level of independence they have fought for, even if this is limited. The committee says that if it is not possible to respect the child as a bearer of rights when assessing them for a placement, the placement is at risk of failing and the child may then end up on the streets again.\(^\text{134}\)

The children’s own stories of the situation in their country of origin is also confirmed by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (UD). UD points out that people from Morocco may find it difficult to prove their identity due to many children not being registered in the population register. This is particularly relevant for children who were born out of wedlock. It is not unusual for children between the ages of 7 and 14 to work, primarily within agriculture and in private homes as domestic help. This work often takes place under very difficult conditions and assaults and abuse from employers occur. Children may also be forced into prostitution.\(^\text{125}\)

In a thesis from 2017, Lisa Aspegren describes how the number of asylum seeking unaccompanied minors from Morocco has increased significantly over a ten-year period. A total of 1,527 unaccompanied minors from Morocco have applied for asylum in Sweden between 2010 and 2017, of which 1,126 were boys and 152 girls. The chances of them being granted a residence permit are limited but in spite of this, few deportation decisions are enforced. Aspegren explains that the reasons why deportation is not enforced are the difficulties obtaining identification documents and that the Moroccan authorities do not collaborate with Swedish authorities regarding repatriations. Her assessment is that, taking into account the best interest of the child and children’s special needs for security and stability, the conditions are in place to make more generous assessments concerning Moroccan unaccompanied minors’ rights to residence permits.\(^\text{126}\)

When it is impossible in practise for people to return to their country of origin, this may constitute grounds for granting a residence permit. As in the case of some of the North African children, it may be that the country of origin will not accept them. The inquiry into residence permits on the grounds of practical impediments to enforcement and statutory limitation suggests in its final report that the Aliens Act should clearly state that consideration shall be given to practical impediments to enforcement as early as the initial application and that residence permits may be granted on those grounds. The inquiry’s assessment is that the legislation is unclear about what potential there is to grant residence permits on the grounds of practical impediments to enforcement. Furthermore, the inquiry states that the conditions are

\(^{121}\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 21 (2017) on children in street situations, points 9 and 12.

\(^{124}\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 21 (2017) on children in street situations, points 12 and 45.


not currently in place for ensuring that rejection or deportation decisions are not made when it is already clear prior to a decision concerning a residence permit being made that a removal decision would not be enforceable.\footnote{Uppehållstillstånd på grund av praktiska verkställighets hinder och preskription (Residence permit on the grounds of practical impediments to enforcement and statutory limitation. Final report of the Inquiry into residence permit on the grounds of practical impediments to enforcement), SOU 2017:84, pp. 36 and 315.}

The inquiry proposes that the term practical impediments to enforcement be inserted into the provision that allows the Migration Agency to grant residence permits after a removals decision has become legally binding. This means that new circumstances that imply there are reasons to presume that those impediments exist may be grounds for granting a residence permit.\footnote{Council of Europe, Country Visit Sweden: move beyond emergency mode in migration-related areas to strengthen human rights, https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/sweden-move-beyond-emergency-mode-in-migration-related-areas-to-strengthen-human-rights, accessed 29/10/2017. At the time of writing the commissioner’s full report following their visit to Sweden has not yet been published.}

Children we have met talk about previous placements that have sometimes been good but sometimes appear to be inadequate or frankly inappropriate. These placements may have been in their country of origin, in European countries they have travelled through or in Sweden. The placements have often ended in them leaving or perceived failures that make it even more difficult for them to trust that the next place will be safe.

Children who have been forced to look after themselves for a long time may find the contrast between that life and being treated in accordance with Swedish systems and rules difficult. The view of childhood and the demands in terms of what a teenager is expected to cope with may vary depending on the conditions under which children have grown up. Consequently, the Ombudsman for Children argues that there is a need for adapted homes where children are able to receive professional help to have their rights ensured.

According to the relevant legislation, the desire for a better life is not sufficient to be allowed to stay in Sweden, grounds for a residence permit are required. The North African children we have met say they have been told that no one from their country of origin is allowed to stay in Sweden. This means that they lose hope long before they even get an opportunity to present their potential grounds for being granted a residence permit.

The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted, on a visit to Sweden in autumn 2017, the importance of authorities always putting the best interest of the child first when it comes to migration and asylum.\footnote{UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Joint general comment No. 3 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 22 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the general principles regarding the human rights of children in the context of international migration, point 33.} According to the commissioner and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, all decisions regarding returning must be made on the basis of individual circumstances such as if it being established that there is an existing family network or a safe environment for them to return to.\footnote{Council of Europe, Country Visit Sweden: move beyond emergency mode in migration-related areas to strengthen human rights, https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/sweden-move-beyond-emergency-mode-in-migration-related-areas-to-strengthen-human-rights, accessed 29/10/2017. At the time of writing the commissioner’s full report following their visit to Sweden has not yet been published.}

The Ombudsman for Children’s proposals

The Ombudsman for Children is deeply concerned about the North African children’s accounts of vulnerability, violence, criminality, drugs and abuse on the streets. These children have often lived in several different countries before they finally arrive to Sweden. Vulnerability characterises their lives and they find no way to get out of it. Our conclusion is that this group of children has a great need to be offered adapted homes where there are opportunities to form
relationships and a social context. We are also of the opinion that the collaboration has to be reinforced throughout Europe, but also between Sweden and Morocco. The aim of this is to protect these children and acknowledge that they are victims of a non-functional social system where children feel they have no opportunities and no future. Sweden should grant residence permits to the children and young people who have permanent impediments to enforcement.

1. Introduce more adapted homes that are able to meet the needs of the child.

2. Reinforce the collaboration within and outside of Europe in order to protect unaccompanied minors who are on the move and are living, or are at risk of ending up on, the streets.

3. Those children and young people who have permanent impediments to enforcement, should be granted residence permits.
Interview: Christian Frödén

Christian Frödén is Head of the Unaccompanied Group within the Swedish border police. He conducts outreach work with unaccompanied minors in Stockholm’s high-risk environments and is tasked with taking those who have turned 18, had their asylum application rejected and are to be deported into custody.

Christian Frödén and his colleagues find the young people where they are known to be hanging out, most of the time in Stockholm city centre. They identify people, conduct body searches, check drug status and whether they are wanted.

“About a third of the people we meet are wanted for crimes or have gone missing and are living as missing persons. The North Africans are those who are most likely to go missing”, he says.

Why do they leave their accommodation?

“It can be that they are unhappy or that the home is located somewhere remote. They want to be in the big city near their friends. Some have a criminal agenda and they may have a responsibility to support their family in their country of origin. This responsibility is a real burden. There is also a worry that older people have a hold on the boys. We met a 13-year-old boy who stayed for two or three weeks before he left Sweden with his friend. The friend said that they ‘just had to go a sort a thing down in Europe’. Then they never came back. We saw older people with this little guy. What sort of power did they have? What mission did this guy have?”

Christian Frödén wrote his first police report on human trafficking in spring 2014:

“A young person had been visited by a criminal network with the demand: ‘Now it’s time for you to start working for us again, like you did down in Europe’. When he was there he had carried large amounts of narcotics.”

The North African group and the Afghan group have different circumstances, both in terms of their chances of being allowed to remain in Sweden and their motives for being here. Can you compare them?

“The North African group have migrated from country to country through Europe and finally ended up in Sweden. They are street-smart in a way that the Afghans definitely are not – that’s a big difference. They have a completely different experience of the journey here. The Afghan boys are extremely well motivated and learn Swedish very quickly. For them it is often a project on the part of their family or relatives. They have collected money to pay a smuggler to bring them here, like it always is, and they have to succeed here. Many come here because of hearsay: that Sweden is so fantastic and that everything will work out. The North Africans and the Afghans share the dream of Europe and of a better life here.”

How would you describe their situation when they have gone missing?

“Very vulnerable! They’ll pay under the table for a room at some friend’s house who has an apartment in an assisted living programme. They may pay with sexual favours or by committing crimes. The only way to make money is to either sell sex or commit a crime: selling drugs or stealing.

Do you see a pattern where they go missing again and again?

“Yes, they are very mobile. If we in the police service are efficient and check these guys in one place in the city, they move on to the next location. If it’s too much for them they go to the next city. Then they take a trip to Norway or Germany. Geographically they are strictly borderless.”

How are they feeling and what do they need when they come back?

“They often need to pause their substance abuse and put some weight on, they have often
become very skinny when they have been on the streets for a while. They need structure. Just walking the streets is an addiction in itself. They almost need to be deprogrammed from it. The group provides a sense of security that it is hard to get away from, even though there are older criminals within the group that may subject the young people to sexual abuse and to other criminal purposes. They have left their families behind long ago. They are perhaps ashamed of their situation or have a bad relationship with them. But they still have the group on the street – it's all they have. They are their family.”

Turning 18 and having their asylum application rejected are critical moments for many. How do you notice this?

“Very clearly – it is often then that they go missing. It’s clearly evident in the Afghan group because they believe that they have nowhere to go. They don’t have experience of having travelled on their own. They suffer from mental ill-health and that almost always involves drugs as self-medication or an escape. We have lots of boys who have started using hard drugs to a large extent, linked to an incredibly long asylum process and their 18th birthday. That is definitely the case!”

“This will get a lot worse as not all the boys have received their decisions yet. As the rejections come in, we’ll see even more of these boys becoming casualties. We will see overdoses with fatal results in the future. I’m convinced of it.”
Coming back

In order to understand the bigger picture of why children go missing and the circumstances connected to their disappearance, we need to understand why and in which ways children return. We think it is also important to learn about how the children themselves have experienced how they have been received by responsible adults when they have returned and whether they see a need for further measures.

The children tell their stories

Living as a missing person entails, as previously reported, a tough life largely characterised by vulnerability. Some children have gone missing from their placements on several occasions and later returned. Some children have been found by the authorities when they have been living on the streets and have then been taken into care due to drugs or criminality. Some are still living as missing persons. Those who are living as missing persons are all over the age of 18, according to the Migration Agency. According to themselves, however, the majority are under 18 but have had their ages adjusted upwards. In this section, children and young people talk about their experiences of returning or about the reasons why they are still living as missing persons.

Why the children return

Several of the children say they return because they need emergency help and support. Living as a missing person is worse than many could ever have imagined. Amad talks about his return after having lived on the streets for a while:

“Then I had to return because I had no choice. I had neither money nor anyone else to turn to. I was forced to return. If I had not returned, who would’ve helped me on the streets?”

Baahir describes how the hard life on the streets finally made him phone social services and ask for help:

“I said, I can’t live on the street, I can’t. I can’t deal with this much. It’s really hard. It’s cold, people don’t have homes... When you meet the police at three in the morning in Stockholm and they say: ‘Bloody hell, it’s 20 degrees below but you’re sleeping there.’ Then they phone social services. Social services tell them ‘you can take them to some HVB home’.”

For one girl it was missing school in combination with repeated phone calls from her custodian that made her return to the home:

“I decided I’m going back. So then, they had phoned me several times, they wanted me back. I don’t care if they want me to or not. When I [came] back, it [was] just for my school.”

Another girl describes how she came back to her foster home of her own accord when life as a missing person became too hard:

“I don’t like creating trouble, you know. I felt that it had been too much now. I needed to come back.”

A group of boys were related to each other and had travelled through Europe together. After having been separated by the Migration Agency they ran away and spent some time on the streets. When they finally came back it was after they had been promised they would be able to live together. One of the boys tells us:

“Social services talked to the Migration Agency and finally the agency said, ‘yes OK, you can [go] back and we won’t separate you’. We finally managed to be together and they didn’t split us up. But if they had decided from the beginning that we wouldn’t be separated, it would’ve been better because we had no warm clothes and many of us got a cold because it was very cold out. And it was very hard.”

Rakin says that he did not want to go back until he had found his relative who he knew was also in Sweden. When he had found his relative he says it was a good feeling coming back to the home.

“Yes, it’s good here. Here is the safest place I’ve experienced. Yes, it’s secure, not just safe. Here you can have everything you want. Everything you need.”

Akram says that he was picked up by the police, but it was not voluntary:

“After I had caused a massive problem, the police took me.”
Children being taken into care by the police due to criminality or drugs is mentioned in several of our conversations. Children seldom talk about what led to them being taken into care, but most say that they understand why the police picked them up. When asked if there is anything that would have made him come back voluntarily, Nasim answered:

“I myself don’t need anything other than help. Since arriving in Sweden I’ve not had an easy time and I didn’t get a good family to live with. All the time I was unhappy living with these families.”

The accounts reveal a fear of authorities and what consequences running away could have for their chances of staying in the country. Some children talk about a fear of the police, in particular. This fear may be founded in their own experiences or in rumours from other children. One boy says that he was afraid of the police picking him up as he thought it would affect his asylum process. Because of this, he did not dare to be on the run any more, despite the situation at the home being bad.

“I’ve been very afraid of the police and the Migration Agency. As I had been talking to my friend, she told me if you run away a lot the Migration Agency will say ‘you have not integrated well into Swedish society, you don’t have a positive attitude towards Swedish society. They’ll say no straight away’.”

Boys who have gone missing also talk about how they have travelled out of Sweden to other European countries. One boy had received a rejection and made his way down through Europe to apply for asylum in another country. However, when he realised that the situation for refugees was as bad there, he phoned his friend in Sweden and asked for help to come back again.

Some young people describe how they have applied for asylum in other countries in Europe but have been sent back to Sweden. This is due to the Dublin Regulation. Children describe the disappointment and resignation they feel when they are sent back to Sweden again. Jaser says:

“And I made my way there and I applied for asylum there, in Belgium. But after a few months they retrieved my fingerprints and I was sent back here. And here I sit with an uncertain future.”

The treatment of children who return

When the children have returned, they describe various types of treatment. One girl says she was pregnant when she came back, and she says she was asked questions but that she did not want to talk about what had happened. Other children say that they were hardly asked any questions at all when they came back. Khalil says that he had wanted social services to ask more about how he was feeling and how he had been doing. Amad describes a fear of the consequences running away can have:

“Because then when I came back to the home, the staff said, ‘if you run away again social services may lock you up’. So because of fear of getting locked up I didn’t run away from there again. But I thought more about what I would do.”

One child talks about how they were treated by the staff of the HVB home after having run away.

“They locked me in a garage outside and it was winter. It was very cold. I was only wearing shorts and a sweater. It wasn’t a warm sweater. I stayed in that garage for about four hours. I tried to break the window with my hand. I tried to break it many times and then I managed to leave the garage, but I cut my hand. Then when I came out the police came, and the police wanted to take me.”

One girl says that when she told the woman in the foster home that she had been raped while she was missing, the woman became so sad and shocked that she had a breakdown and left the girl alone. The girl did not say anything else after that.

Some children have been taken into care due to criminality or drug use. Those we have met who talk about drug use also describe how they have often received help with their addiction

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132 Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (The Dublin Regulation). The main rule is that unaccompanied minors are exempt from the Dublin Regulation.
when they have been placed in institutions. Eben says that, after having returned, he received help with his drug addiction:

“I’ve stopped taking drugs and it feels like I’m well. My body also feels well. I want to do sports and I want to build up my life like all other people.”

The dream of a future and family
Both children who have returned and unaccompanied young people who are still living as missing persons have dreams about the future. Eben knows that there are many people who are in his position:

“I know there are millions in the world, not here in Sweden. Everywhere, those who sleep on the street, who don’t have food, no parents, no money, nothing. But I believe, I believe that... not believe, I hope, think that it will get better for me. To have a life. We don’t need to get rich or drive a Ferrari or anything. A life is enough.”

Sometimes the dreams are big, like becoming a professional footballer or getting rich. But often it is just about having a normal life. A normal life may involve attending school, living with a family and getting a job. Children say that they want to be, for example, car mechanics, police officers, dentists, singers, vets, doctors or lawyers. Family is an important part of the dream for many. Those who have not had a family in their country of origin may dream about having one when they grow up. Kaden knows what he wants:

“I want to stay here in Sweden. I want to start a family here. I want to start a family in the future. A good family, not a split-up family or a street family.”

When Akil received a rejection to his asylum application, a lot changed. When he came to Sweden he dreamed of becoming a top footballer. Those dreams were shattered and he had to stop playing football as he had nowhere to live. For him, and for several other children, the dreams have been reduced to finding a place to sleep for the night, somewhere to wash clothes and finding food.

Eben has returned but describes a hopelessness for the future:

“I’ve dreamed a lot, but nothing has become reality so I’m tired of dreaming. Because dreams are still dreams and they don’t lead to anything so now I’m thinking about the things I can do.”

Aasim describes similar thoughts:

“Shit life. Shit life, nothing. I felt nothing, from the street, six years I lived on the streets. Nothing. I feel nothing. That’s why I thought that I have to change my life. There's no end to this path to the streets. There's no end. There's no full stop.”

The Ombudsman for Children’s analysis
Analysis of the children’s voices
Unaccompanied minors tell us about different reasons why they come back after going missing. The children who have been living on the streets while missing talk about a lack of food and money and an everyday life characterised by crime, drugs and exploitation. Our understanding is that the hard life on the streets may have forced their decision to return. Some children talk about how they have come to the attention of the police for crimes they have committed, as victims of crime such as human trafficking or that the police have contacted social services to help them get off the streets. Several of the children and young people we have met have been at state-run residential homes for young people, which to some degree may explain why many talk about contact with the police, specifically.

The accounts of children and young people reveal a fear of authorities and the consequences that running away could have for their chances of staying in the country. The Ombudsman for Children's interpretation is that there is a lack of information for children regarding the asylum process and what is actually relevant in asylum cases. It is also our understanding that children feel the situation in Sweden is so bad they have nothing to lose by leaving the country.

Good contact with responsible adults seems to be an important factor in getting children to return. The Ombudsman for Children's interpretation of the children’s accounts is that their reasons for returning can be everything from the knowledge that someone cares, to being
listened to and being involved in decisions concerning placement. It also appears to us that some children returned voluntarily when the reason why they went missing to begin with no longer exists. This may involve children who have been separated returning once they have been allowed to live together.

Those we have met describe different types of treatment from the responsible adults when they return. Some have been asked several questions by staff from the home/foster parents, social services or their custodian about what has happened while they were missing. Others have barely been asked any questions at all. There are also differences in terms of how much the children themselves want to talk about what has happened. Based on the children’s accounts, it seems unclear what responsibility different actors take on when a child returns after having gone missing.

Young people with rejection decisions describe how support in the form of accommodation, a custodian, legal counsel or contact with social services has disappeared after the rejection decision and their 18th birthday or age adjustment. After the rejection decision some have been to repatriation talks while others have stayed away. The Ombudsman for Children thinks this clearly indicates that there is a need to review the information and support provided to unaccompanied minors regarding the potential outcome of an asylum application.

**Analysis based on the rights of the child**

We have listened to children and young people describe their experiences of returning or the reasons why they are still living as missing persons. These accounts raise questions about needs and access to support interventions when an unaccompanied minor returns and about what roles the responsible adults have.

**Providing the right support**

In the Ombudsman for Children’s meetings with children and young people, it became evident that the children have, to a great extent, lived under very difficult circumstances during the time they were missing. It is therefore important that when they return they are asked about their experiences of exposure to violence including abuse or vulnerability, and about potential drug dependence or criminality. Any treatment needs there may be must also be noted. As mentioned previously, unaccompanied minors are particularly vulnerable and are at risk of being exploited or subjected to abuse.\(^{133}\) The Committee on the Rights of the Child has encouraged states to ensure that children who are victims of crime receive protection and access to effective remedies.\(^{134}\) According to Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children who have been victims of, for example, sexual abuse, neglect or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment have a right to recovery and social reintegration. In combination with the highest attainable standard of health, as per Article 24, this means that the state has an obligation to ensure the child receives adapted care and rehabilitation.

Any crimes that children have been subjected to while they were mission do not, for obvious reasons, come to the responsible actors’ attention until the children are found or return by some other means. The National Board of Health and Welfare’s handbook on unaccompanied minors states that legal guardians and custodians are not bound by confidentiality. They can report all types of crime to the police. Social services staff can also file a police report if, while doing their job, they learn or become suspicious that a crime has been committed against someone who is under the age of 18.\(^{135}\) The Ombudsman for Children would like to stress the importance of

\(^{133}\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, points 50 and 52.

\(^{134}\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13 (2011), The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, point 41.

\(^{135}\) National Board of Health and Welfare, Ensamkommande barn och unga – Handbok om socialnämnders ansvar och uppgifter (Unaccompanied minors and young people – Handbook on the responsibilities and duties of the social welfare committee), 2016, p. 63.

Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act (2009:400), Chapter10, Section 21.
investigating whether unaccompanied minors have been victims of some type of crime while missing and of ensuring that the responsible adults knows how to act in such cases.

It is vital that children are asked questions about their experiences from the time they were missing in order to discover whether they have been victims of crime and thus allow suitable support to be offered. The Committee on the Rights of the Child points out that it is important to increase awareness of behavioural and social problems such as young people’s substance abuse, behavioural disorders and mental ill-health, which undermines children’s health and development. The conversations have provided us with information that suggests a number of children have been victims of crimes including human trafficking. In 2017, the County Administrative Board of Stockholm presented a review of a total of 68 police cases of suspected human trafficking involving children. The review showed that the majority of children were unaccompanied and that only one case had resulted in a prosecution. However, according to the County Administrative Board, more investigative measures could have been implemented in several cases.137

A number of children talk about crime and substance abuse from the time they were missing. They also describe a mental ill-health, which is worrying. Research shows that young people’s substance abuse has a significant negative impact on their mental health. Research also shows that mental ill-health lowers the age at which children begin using alcohol and drugs and that mental ill-health increases the risk of going from being a user to having an abuse problem/becoming an addict.138

In those taken into care in accordance with LVU due to criminality or substance abuse, we see a tendency for the children to be given care and treatment for their substance abuse. However, they do not tend to be given care and treatment for the potential mental ill-health that may have contributed to them going missing. We think this may lead to the child being freed from addiction but does not reduce the risk of the child going missing. Research indicates that it is important to conduct a clear survey in order to detect the large comorbidity139 between substance abuse and mental ill-health. If this is not done, there is a risk of only one of the problems being treated which in turn significantly increases the risk of the treatment failing.140

A number of the children we have met who are staying at state-run residential homes for young people are feeling very unwell and some talk about suicidal thoughts. The Ombudsman for Children therefore argues it is of great importance that children who return go through a new assessment of their individual needs and their well-being with a multidisciplinary team and that a placement is subsequently matched to the child’s needs.

Adults’ responsibilities and treatment of the children
A fear of authorities and being taken into care under LVU is mentioned in children’s accounts. If there is information indicating that the child is being harmed due to their own behaviour, the social welfare committee can decide to take them into care immediately under LVU and request police assistance.141 The aim of this legislation is for children to do well, despite this being a piece

135 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 15 (2013), On the child’s right to the highest attainable standard of health [Article 24], point 38.
139 Comorbidity in this context means that someone has a diagnosed substance abuse problem or addiction as well as some other form of mental disorder (see National Board of Health and Welfare, Nationella riktlinjer för vård och stöd vid missbruk och beroende – Stöd för styrning och ledning [National guidelines for care and support for substance abuse and addiction – Support for steering and governance], 2015, p. 10.
141 Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (1990:52), Sections 3 and 6.
National Board of Health and Welfare, Ensamkommande barn och unga – Handbok om socialnämndens ansvar och
of legislation that involves the use of compulsion. However, when children perceive LVU as a threat, it may make it more difficult for the child to return. However, a great deal is required in order for an unaccompanied minor who has gone mission to be taken into care under LVU. Two judgments from the administrative court of appeal in Stockholm state that children spending time in an unknown location without a social network and legal guardians and that they were conducting a “vagabond existence” were not considered sufficient grounds. According to the Ombudsman for Children, it is of great importance that the child who has been found receives information from, for example, the police or social services about which action may be pertinent. It is also important that unaccompanied minors are aware of what is actually of relevance to the assessment of their asylum application and do not think that going missing will affect the decision.

The fact that responsible adults are looking for a child who has gone missing may, according to accounts from children and young people, make it easier for them to return voluntarily. According to the children, this shows that someone cares about their situation. As we have pointed out previously in this report, the Ombudsman for Children would like to stress the importance of various actors having knowledge of what their roles and responsibilities are when an unaccompanied minor has gone missing. A child who goes missing must be looked for.

When a child who has gone missing returns, the question of who is responsible for the child’s accommodation remains. If an unaccompanied minor goes missing and is then found again, the main rule is that the municipality to which they have been assigned remains responsible. However, the social welfare committee in the assigned municipality may close a child’s case if the child has not been found within a certain time period. How long they can wait before closing a case is determined following an individual assessment. If it is discovered that a child’s case has been closed by the social welfare committee, the Migration Agency must assign the child to a municipality again.

An obstacle to cooperation when a child returns is difficulties in investigating who is responsible for the child who has gone missing. There is often a lack of information about why the child has gone missing and the child does not always know which municipality is responsible, which can make the investigative process difficult. Cooperation can also be made more difficult by the case often being dropped or closed by social services as early as 2–4 weeks after the child went missing. This means that those who have found the child, often the police or a social services emergency unit must devote time and resources to investigating which municipality the child went missing from. This can in turn lead to an increased risk of the child going missing again. Procedures for dropping cases when a child goes missing, as well as how long the child has been missing thus become significant in terms of what happens when a child returns.

As mentioned previously, Sweden has been criticised for not sufficiently investigating many cases involving unaccompanied minors who go missing. Based on what children have told us,
our view is that the treatment they receive when they return after having gone missing differs. Some children have been asked questions by the staff of the home, social services or their custodian, while others have been asked no questions at all. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that the treatment of children who return must improve. In agreement with the county administrative boards, we think it is important for different actors to cooperate and for the child to come into direct contact with social care personnel. Contacting the custodian or staff from social services who are familiar with the child is important in order to understand the child’s needs. 148

Some of the children we have met have been picked up by the police because of criminal behaviour while they were missing. Some children do not want to talk about what they have done, while others unprompted talk about both minor offences and more serious crimes. On the basis of the children’s accounts, it is evident that they have committed these offences while in a difficult situation and that they have considered themselves to have no choice. Children and young people without residence permits describe how they are not allowed to work and commit crimes to get money for food. Regardless of the reason, it is obviously a problem that unaccompanied minors in these situations are committing crimes. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that both the children themselves and society as a whole would benefit from these children receiving support interventions. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sweden has a responsibility to ensure that unaccompanied minors obtain the standard of living required for their development, particularly in regard to food, clothing and accommodation. 149

It is vital that conversations take place with children who return. Not least in order to investigate the reasons why they went missing to begin with and thus prevent them from going missing again in the future. These conversations should also include questions about how the child has been living while they were missing in order to assess whether the child needs adapted support after potentially having been a victim of crime or a participant in criminal activities or developed drug dependence. According to the Ombudsman for Children, these conversations should be conducted by social services, which has the main responsibility for assessing the child’s need for support. The Ombudsman for Children believes is should be made clear that conversations with children who return after having gone missing must take place. In these conversations, the child needs to be asked questions about the reasons why they went missing and about how the child has been living while missing.

148 The county administrative boards, Päflykt och försvunnen—Metodstöd för regional samverkan kring ensamkommande barn som försvinner (Lost in migration – Methodological support for regional cooperation concerning unaccompanied minors who go missing), 2017, p. 47.
149 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6 (2005), Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, point 44.
Still missing – feeling hopeless

Some of the unaccompanied minors who have gone missing are still missing. Several of them say that they went missing in connection with their 18th birthday or having their age adjusted upwards and receiving a rejection.

Ramy, who says he is 17, has applied for asylum in Sweden and in another European country. He was assessed to be an adult in the other country and was therefore transferred there under the terms of the Dublin Regulation. Ramy says that he is a child and that he knows no one in the other country but has his brother in Sweden. He therefore went back to Sweden and is currently living in hiding while waiting to be able to apply for asylum again. He lives with a constant fear of being sent back to a country where he does not know anyone.

Babar describes how difficult it has been to cope following the rejection decision.

“It feels... I’ll say, a real catastrophe. When you have no help, you get no help from... no social services, no custodian, no one. You can’t work because no one will give you work in Sweden without a personal identity number or if you don’t have a residence permit in Sweden you aren’t allowed to work.”

Some talk about repatriation talks at the Migration Agency but describe how they cannot return to their countries of origin for various reasons. Some have never been to the country they are a citizen of. In our meetings, some young people say they have tried to apply for emergency assistance from social services but none of the children who have received a rejection talk about supportive conversations subsequent to the rejection decision. Babar talks about the desire to stay in Sweden:

“But I’ll do anything. Legal, illegal, I’m staying here.”

Matin describes a fear shared by many in his situation – being discovered by the police or having to show identification papers.

“If I see a guard I feel very worried, is he going to ask me ‘can you show me your ID?’ What am I supposed to answer?”

Unaccompanied young people who are still missing very often describe a sense of hopelessness in regard to their situation.

“I don’t feel so hopeful actually. I’m just thinking that I’m black and I don’t think anyone’s going to help me”, says Kassim.

Analysis based on the rights the child concerning young people who are still missing

Those unaccompanied young people who are still missing are all over the age of 18, according to the Migration Agency. They have all had their asylum applications rejected or are to be transferred to another country and are now living as undocumented persons in Sweden. Based on their accounts, we understand that, due to the rejection of their asylum application, they cannot stay in Sweden but also that they have nowhere else to go. The young people themselves do not believe they are able to return to their country of origin or to the country where they first provided their fingerprints. Several say that the situation feels hopeless.

The potential for the asylum application to result in a rejection is a fact that does not seem to be discussed with children and young people to any major extent. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that it is important to maintain clarity throughout the process regarding the possible outcomes of an asylum application so that children and young people better understand and have an opportunity to prepare for what might happen.

In Strömstorp Municipality, a project was implemented over the course of 2014 and 2015 that aimed to create better conditions for those children whose asylum application is rejected. A preliminary study for the project from 2013 and 2014 showed that procedures and working

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101 Municipalities are allowed, but not obliged, to provide financial emergency assistance to people who are living in hiding, in accordance with Chapter 4, Section 2 of the Social Services Act (2001:453).

102 For more information, see the municipality website: http://www.stromsund.se/byggaboochmiljo/inflyttningintegration/avslutadeprojekt/atervandandeensamkommando.46022001337287180f3f88dd4.html, accessed 09/10/2017.
methods for working with unaccompanied minors are developed up until the point at which the children receive a rejection decision. According to the study, the rejection often leads to a crisis among the children.\textsuperscript{52}

The model developed in Strömsund Municipality over the course of the project builds on the idea that interventions are required for each unaccompanied minor from the point that the child arrives in Sweden. The idea behind this is to always have in mind that the child may potentially need to return. The interventions shall include, for example, information, cooperation and support in all parts of the asylum process, from arrival to return.\textsuperscript{53}

The fact that there is a lack of support and information regarding rejection and returning is confirmed by the children and young people who the Ombudsman for Children has met. We argue that there is a great need for developed procedures and models.

\textsuperscript{52} Strömsund Municipality and the European Return Fund, \textit{Mellan avslag och utvisning – rapport om situationen för ensamkommande barn med avslag} (Between rejection and deportation – report on the situation for unaccompanied minors with a rejection), 2014, pp. 39 ff.

\textsuperscript{53} Strömsund Municipality, \textit{Arbeta med återvändande ensamkommande – en modellbeskrivning} (Working with returning unaccompanied minors – a model description), 2015, pp. 7 and 17.
The Ombudsman for Children’s proposals

The Ombudsman for Children believes it is unacceptable that of the 1,736 children who have gone missing since 2014, as many as 1,456 children and young people remain missing.\(^{154}\) Beyond those we have met, we do not know whether they are still in Sweden, how they are living or if they are alive. The accounts of the unaccompanied children and young people we have met are worrying. They indicate deficiencies in the implementation of children’s fundamental rights which lead to children going missing.

Unaccompanied minors we have met have fled from war, oppression and poverty and say that they came to Sweden with hopes and dreams of a bright future. After being placed in foster homes, network homes, HVB homes or state-run residential homes for young people, they describe different factors that contribute to them going missing. The children talk about having been separated from their siblings, about shortcomings and violence in the homes and about isolation from the rest of society and the lack of leisure activities. Children also describe how they live with constant uncertainty and worry connected to the asylum process, a rejection decision and their 18th birthday. Children we have listened to describe a great vulnerability during their lives as missing persons. Many have lived on the streets and talk about drugs, crime, exploitation and violence. The children who have returned have often lived under very difficult circumstances while they were missing and are in need of adapted support. Children and young people who are still missing describe how they feel a great sense of hopelessness in regard to their situation.

In light of the accounts of children and young people, the Ombudsman for Children proposes the following changes:

1. Prevent children going missing by ensuring safety and expertise when placing unaccompanied minors
   
   - Establish state-run reception and assessment units for the assessment of unaccompanied minors’ needs and adapted homes so that the child’s rights and needs are met.

The Ombudsman for Children’s assessment is that one reason why children go missing is problems based on the child’s placement. Treating each child on the basis of their individual situation and prerequisites, as well as investigating each child’s needs, is the most important change that needs to happen in order to prevent more children going missing. In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, unaccompanied minors have the right to special protection and alternative care. A fundamental principle for all interventions is that the child is heard.\(^{155}\) A right which, according to the children, has not been ensured and which has led to them going missing.

The Ombudsman for Children therefore proposes that state-run reception and assessment units be established. In these homes, the child will be able to meet a multidisciplinary team that will conduct a general assessment of the child’s needs in consultation with the child. In order for the placement to be well matched to the child’s needs there also needs to be additional types of adapted homes where the staff have specialist knowledge and expertise.

There are also needs to improve supervision and inspection of all types of placements. Children we have met say that the people and systems that are in place to provide protection and help are not working or are inaccessible.

The Ombudsman for Children makes the assessment that some children have needs that require a custodian with training and specific expertise in order to be able to ensure the best

\(^{154}\) Statistics obtained from the Swedish Migration Agency, 18/10/2017. The number of children who have gone missing between 01/01/14 and 17/10/17. See Appendix 1.

\(^{155}\) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 12, 20, 22 and 25.
interests of the child. We would therefore like to see a model involving professional custodians for unaccompanied minors with specific needs. We think that such a model would improve the child’s involvement in all processes and improve the understanding of the child’s individual needs.

Some of the children we have met talk about how they do not have any leisure activities or have not attended school for periods of time. Some children talk about feeling isolated from the rest of society. This has contributed to them going missing. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that it must be possible to guarantee placed children a meaningful everyday life with both school and leisure activities.

The accounts reveal that a contributory cause of going missing is the lack of information in advance of their 18th birthday, age adjustment and a potential rejection. The children feel a strong sense of fear and worry about what will happen. We argue that many instances of children going missing could have been prevented with the aid of adequate information and support being provided at the right time, which the child has a right to in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Social Services Act. It is incredibly important that social services always inform and talk to the child about matters that concern them.

Upward age adjustments have been mentioned in several accounts. Regardless of whether the young person contests the age adjustment, the process is described as unclear and also the children say that there are no support interventions in place in the event of an upward age adjustment. Age assessments must be conducted in a holistic manner and in accordance with the rule of law. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that the Government carefully must monitor developments in the area and improve the support interventions provided to young people.

2. **All children who go missing must be looked for**

- The custodian should have a statutory responsibility to ensure a police report is made within 24 hours of an unaccompanied minor going missing.
- Each unaccompanied minor who goes missing must be looked for swiftly without exception.
- The Government should task the appropriate authority with conducting an annual survey and analysis regarding the situation surrounding unaccompanied minors who go missing.

Each child who goes missing needs to be looked for as soon as possible, without exception. When a child goes missing, it is necessary for all actors around the child to cooperate and know what their task is. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, each child in Sweden shall be protected against all forms of violence and abuse. Each child also has a right to an adequate standard of living.\(^{156}\) When it comes to unaccompanied minors who have gone missing, it is clear that Sweden’s is not taking enough responsibility. The situation is serious as the children are in a situation in which they can easily be exploited or forced to commit crimes.

The Ombudsman for Children argues that there needs to be clarification that, in accordance with the normalisation principle, it should be incumbent on the custodian to file a police report when an unaccompanied minor has gone missing. A police report should be submitted to the police within 24 hours so that valuable information does not disappear and so that the search operation can be started promptly. We do not know exactly how many unaccompanied minors actually go missing at present.\(^{157}\) We also do not know how many children are living on the streets as all children have not applied for asylum. The Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that there is a need for national statistics and follow-up of what the situation is like for

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156 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 19 and 27.
157 Foreexample, of the children the Ombudsman for Children has met while working on this report, not all are included in the Migration Agency’s list of missing children.
children who go missing, who they are, how they are living and what measures are required.

3. Ensure that there is support and protection when children return

- Social services must follow up every child who returns, with an investigation and assessment of the child’s rights and needs.

The children and young people’s accounts reveal how, while they were missing, they have been subjected to abuse, developed poor health, become dependent on drugs or been dragged into criminality. According to Articles 24 and 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health, rehabilitation, support and treatment. Several children we have met say that they have been asked no questions about why they went missing or how they have lived while missing.

In order to prevent children going missing and to investigate the child’s need for support interventions, the Ombudsman for Children is of the opinion that there should be a requirement for a system of follow-up and analysis of the child’s needs. The National Board of Health and Welfare should be tasked with creating a system within social services for follow-up and analysis of the child’s needs after going missing. The needs assessment shall be conducted the same way as upon arrival, together with a multidisciplinary team, custodian and the child itself.
The children’s own proposals and advice

Proposals for adults

1. Responsible adults must listen to us children, value what we say and do something about it.

Children and young people we have met provide advice and suggestions for different actors on the basis of their experiences.

Many children say that they feel like they have not been listened to or that their opinions are not of as much value as those of adults. Akram talks about how to listen to children:

“Well, first of all you have to listen to what young people have to say. And then you also have to value what is said. If it’s reasonable, then it should be listened to but if it sounds crazy, then let it go. Then you need to do something about it.”

Doing something about it means, for example, not sending the person who has complained about a home back to it before the problem has been resolved. Khalif has a piece of advice for custodians:

“They can just take their mobile phone and call anyway and check what’s up. That everything’s fine and that. That kind of stuff. From the heart. That we have someone who thinks about us. I need an adult who can help me and stuff. Everyone needs that. Not just me.”

2. Staff in the homes and foster parents must have an understanding, be able to provide love and care and be responsible adults

Children stress that being cared for better would result in fewer of them going missing. The fact that someone is thinking about you, showing they care and actually helping when needed means a lot to the unaccompanied minors. Amad calls for more adults who care:

“It’s more that they need compassion. They must have knowledge of what we’ve gone through. They must have an understanding but unfortunately the fact is that since I came here no one has understood us.” Amad also says that he would like an adult to take him by the scruff of the neck and talk to him when he runs away.

Receiving help from responsible adults is something highlighted by several children. Khalif says:

“We don’t want to go missing either, we just want help, if we get help we won’t do drugs and stuff, we’ll be good. We’ll go to school, we’ll do lots of stuff that’s only good. That’s important for the future.”

Naayab thinks the dream of a better life is the same for all unaccompanied minors, regardless of where they come from. He only sees one way out:

“Everybody who comes here, they want help. They don’t want anything else, they just want help. Give people a chance!”

3. The Migration Agency must dare to talk about the reality of the situation and make decisions faster

Many children have talked about their asylum process and Nuhad and Amad have suggestions specifically for the Migration Agency. Nuhad says:

“The only advice I would give the Migration Agency is that they have to tell the young people who come to Sweden the truth. Not give hope to a young person who comes here or lie to him, but they have to tell him it can be like this and it can be like that. There can be negative decisions and there can be positive decisions as well.”

Amad continues:
“They must make quicker decisions. They must do something about it and quicker. Like for me, I’ve been here a year and a half now but still I haven’t got to know anything about what will happen to me. Because it’s like this that if you wait for two years to find out how your future will be, it’s not easy. You go crazy during while waiting.”

Jasert thinks more peoples should get to stay in Sweden:

“All unaccompanied minors who come have a problem that makes them come here. They don’t come here to have fun, they are leaving their parents, their nearest and dearest behind. They come here, they go through mountains, the sea and the Sahara. Not for fun but because they are in need. They have the right to stay and get protection.”

Advice to other children

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

The children we have met sometimes give advice to other children who are in the same situation. This often involves behaving well, going to school and learning Swedish. Sinan says:

“I would advise these children to have patience. They shouldn’t think that they’re the only ones to experience this miserable life. I know it’s miserable, like moving from your own country, leaving your own parents and your family behind you. You can’t imagine it. It’s very hard, especially if you’re close to your family, your friends and your relatives. Your country is the best place for you. I know it’s hard, it’s hard for all of us.”

He also thinks that children who do not feel well should talk to someone. “And taking your own life, violence and that, rebellion, it doesn’t change anything”, he adds.

Yazid has bad experiences of social services and advises children to contact someone else:

“Yes, if they’re confronted with a problem, they should look for someone who can help them, and it must be a Swedish organisation, not someone else. Otherwise they will not find a solution.”

2. **Do not run away from your accommodation and dare to go to school, even if you do not have a residence permit.**

Rana does not think that other children should run away or hide:

“Even if they don’t get a residence permit, they must not hide and be scared, they need to work and like ... or go to school. Like school, it’s really important. So, school is the best thing and that they feel they are free, not sitting at home the whole time and thinking ‘if I go out the police will come and collect me or pick me up’.”

Nuhad finds it difficult to give advice to others in his situation:

“If I tell them they’ll get to stay in Sweden, I’d be lying. Because they’ll be ... we’ll be the same, I sleep on the street and he’ll sleep beside me. And I can’t tell him to break the law and go to another country, but some people do that to be able to get accommodation and food. And they don’t know what the risks of this will be or what will come after this decision.”
Appendix

Statistics from the Swedish Migration Agency concerning unaccompanied minors who have gone missing 2014–17/10/2017

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<thead>
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<th>Current status</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>2016</th>
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