



Human Rights Council
Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Sweden
8th Session

Homeless children in Sweden

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Svenska Franciskushjälpen

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I. Introduction

1. Franciscans International would like to raise the specific issue of homeless children in Sweden, in view of the Universal Periodic Review of Sweden, by the UN Human Rights Council. This report was prepared in collaboration with *Svenska Franciskushjälpen (Franciscan Helpers)* in Gothenburg.
2. Homeless children can be Swedish nationals, or have a permanent residency permit in Sweden. Some are homeless because they see no other solution to difficult domestic situations than to run away from home. Others are thrown out by parents who are unable to assume their responsibilities.¹ In other cases, parents with children are evicted from their apartments, often after long, complex and difficult problems. Many homeless children are also irregular migrant children live in hiding. Recently, the number of homeless children increased further due to the arrival of poor families migrating from the new EU member States. In all cases of homelessness affecting children, multiple human rights violations are involved.

II. Homeless children in Sweden

A neglected issue

3. According to the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, there was a minimum of 17,800 known homeless adults in Sweden in 2005.² Though the national survey mentions the fact that a third of these persons (approx. 5000) are parents of children under the age of 18, no data has yet been collected on the number of homeless children. This is due to the fact that the Swedish social system does not recognize the existence of homeless children. In fact, a minor is not considered as an “individual person”, but always as a member of a family. In its survey, the National Board of Health and Welfare recognizes the inadequate knowledge of homeless families with children. Homeless children are given insufficient attention, and thus insufficient protection.
4. According to the 2005 survey, a new mapping was planned for 2007. However, this updated survey has not been carried out yet. In its plan to implement the government’s strategy to combat homelessness and exclusion from the housing market, the National Board of Health and Welfare sets as a priority objective that children should never be evicted. This is a good first step, but is clearly insufficient to address the much broader issue of homeless children.

The right to adequate housing

5. The right to adequate housing is implicitly recognized in the Social Service Act, which provides that persons in need of accommodation in homes are to be admitted to a family home or to a home for care or residence. Moreover, persons unable to provide for their needs are entitled to livelihood support, which includes support for housing expenditure.

¹ The Swedish branch of Save the Children recently published a study on youth running away from home (see: *Tillfälligt uppbrott. Om ungdomar som rymmer och kastas ut hemifrån*. Yvonne Sjöblom and Sara Högdin, 2009). 3000 adolescents (17-18 years old) from senior high schools in Sweden took part in the survey: the results show that about 11% of all students at some time in their lives either escaped from home or were thrown out of their homes.

² *Homeless Children in Sweden 2005 – scale and character*, Socialstyrelsen (National Board of Health and Welfare)

People can claim assistance and get emergency help, but there is no universal and enforceable right to adequate housing. As the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare recognized themselves, “it is not social services’ principal function to arrange housing for people who have nowhere to live”, and “social services are not capable of influencing either the housing market or the housing construction industry.”³ According to the 2005 survey of the National Board of Health and Welfare, a fifth of homeless persons are homeless as a result of a shortage of housing within their municipality.

6. Homeless children are directly affected by the insufficient recognition and implementation of the right to adequate housing in Sweden. They are living in the street, in broken-down caravans, in “shanty towns”, in cars... which is clearly not meeting the standard of an *adequate* housing.⁴ The violation of the right to adequate housing, which encompasses the “right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity”,⁵ is even more dramatic when it touches on children, who by nature are even more deeply affected by such violations.

Exploitation of homeless children

7. Homeless children are extremely vulnerable to all kinds of human rights violations. They find themselves in a situation of alienation and are dependent on those in their surroundings. This can be extremely destructive, and it is easy for others to exploit the children who, because they are children, might not even realize that they are being exploited or to what they are exposed. Consequently, some homeless children are subject to human trafficking. In this context, the fact that a high number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children disappear from reception centers in Sweden is particularly worrisome.⁶

The situation of homeless irregular migrant children

8. A particularly vulnerable group of children are the homeless migrant children who are in an irregular situation. According to official statistics, Sweden has about 10,000-30,000 undocumented migrants. Irregular migrant children often live in hiding, they do not go to school nor have access to medical facilities. They are subject to exploitation and deplorable work conditions.

³ Ibidem, p.22

⁴ See “General Comment 4” on *The right to adequate housing*, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1991), in particular §8

⁵ Ibidem, §7

⁶ See also Committee on the Rights of the Child, CRC/C/SWE/CO/4 (2009), §§62-63, which recommended that legislative steps are taken to ensure the appointment of a temporary and qualified guardian for each unaccompanied asylum-seeking child within 24 hours of his/her arrival in the country, with a task of informing the child about his/her legal situation as well as available legal immigration procedures.

III. Key national priorities, initiatives and commitments: recommendations

9. The existence and the living conditions of homeless children in Sweden is a clear indicator of considerable, deep-lying defects in the public social security network. Franciscans International and *Svenska Franciskushjälpen* therefore recommend that the Swedish government implements the following recommendations as a matter of priority:
10. **Carry out an updated national survey, in order to evaluate the magnitude of child homelessness in Sweden and its root causes, and prepare an appropriate and effective action plan, in order to address specifically homeless children as a separate issue.**⁷
11. **Fully incorporate the right to adequate housing in the national legislation, take appropriate measures to fulfill the right to adequate housing for all and address the shortage of affordable housing.**
12. **Identify the specific needs of irregular migrant children, in particular those who are homeless, and take measures to fulfill their human rights, including their right to education, to adequate housing and to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health.**

⁷ See also similar recommendation from the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, E/C.12/SWE/CO/5 (2008), §22