

NEWLY ARRIVED CHILD MIGRANTS AND THE SWEDISH ARRIVAL STRUCTURE

Interviews about the autumn of 2015 and a literature review

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This report focusses on the Swedish reception of newly arrived child migrants (0-18 years) during the autumn of 2015. Swedish Migration Agency statistics show that of the more than 160 000 refugees who sought asylum in Sweden in 2015, almost half (approximately 70 000) were under 18. Approximately half of these, around 35 000, were unaccompanied minors. Compared to the previous year, this represents a quadrupling of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and a doubling of children arriving with their parents or guardian.

When children (0-18 years) seek asylum in Sweden, with or without their parents, they face a complex arrival structure comprised of a range of different organisations from all sectors of society including public, societal and private. The public sector is divided into the three different levels of state, county and municipal level. In addition, both the community and private sectors are present, as certain parts of the public welfare system are provided by non-profit organisations and private contractors. The arrival structure comprises the different activities of schools and education, social services, asylum, health and society which are governed by separate governance mechanisms. Therefore, a high level of coordination and cooperation between the different sectors is required.

The autumn of 2015 saw a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers in Sweden and increased pressure on the arrival structure as a result. The problems and challenges that arose were handled in different ways with varying levels of success. The situation provided important lessons and significant experience that can be used to improve the arrival and reception of asylum seekers. This report aims to capture these experiences and provide recommendations for improvement.

Against the backdrop of the current asylum situation, this report aims to highlight the arrival structure for newly arrived children with a particular focus on the autumn of 2015. The overall aim is to identify problems and challenges that arose within and between the different sectors involved in the reception of newly arrived child migrants. Furthermore, the report highlights the consequences of this for the children. The report asks the following three questions: How did the authorities, welfare actors and non-profit organizations manage the reception of newly arrived children during the autumn of 2015? What is the level of awareness regarding the conditions and processes that control and affect the arrival and reception of newly arrived children? What conclusions can be drawn regarding the capacity of the arrival structure to meet the different needs and abilities of newly arrived children?

We responded to the first question through a series of qualitative interviews and the second with a literature review. The interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in the arrival and reception in four municipalities, representing a number of different sectors. Based on the results of the interviews and literature review, a number

of challenges were identified and discussed regarding the consequences for newly arrived children based on their different needs and abilities.

An overall result of the interview study was that due to the high level of commitment and responsibility of operators from different sectors within the arrival structure, work has, on the whole, functioned well. Operations and procedures have been adapted and changed according to the requirements that the larger groups of newly arrived children presented. Many organisations highlight the importance of support and clear guidance from management to be able to adapt resources and initiatives in a flexible way. Furthermore, many organisations work to prevent problems from becoming ingrained and call for an approach that allows for flexible solutions that create more favourable conditions for newly arrived children. But the intense situation experienced last autumn has also contributed to a number of problems and challenges being identified by those interviewed, which in different ways characterised the Swedish reception of newly arrived children. This report highlights and discusses these challenges in relation to previous research (what we know) and research needs (what we need to know more about).

An overall and comprehensive challenge is to manage the impact that waiting and uncertainty in the asylum process has on newly arrived children. The long waiting lists for arrival accommodation mean that unaccompanied minors are delayed in being assigned a trustee, which further affects the possibilities of creating a stable environment. The long waiting times have also meant delayed school placement for children of school age, even when a home municipality and accommodation has been determined, due to a shortage of teachers and facilities. Newly arrived children are a particularly vulnerable group due to the impact of war, break-up and the instability of life as a refugee. Previous research has highlighted the importance of school placement as a safety factor. Similarly, the structure and predictability of everyday life is an important factor to help children deal with anxiety and uncertainty. The interview study highlighted how children who arrived in the asylum group of the autumn of 2015 showed various signs of poor mental health, which was not followed up as the support required was not available. Waiting characterises all aspects of the lives of all asylum seekers and newly arrived children, but in the autumn of 2015, waiting times were particularly long. The current proposal for temporary legislation that greatly restricts the ability to obtain permanent residency is an additional challenge for many children who find themselves in situations with uncertain timeframes and waiting periods. There is a possibility that the waiting period within the arrival structure will become permanent for some newly arrived children, preventing long-term planning for the future.

A second challenge is to counter the risk that newly arrived children live a parallel life to that of their peers due to a delayed and complicated integration process. Asylum



seeking children in the earlier and older age groups are not entitled to pre-school or high school to the same extent as other children in Sweden, resulting in an increased risk of marginalization. Furthermore, newly arrived students tend to be placed in a preparatory education stream separated from other students, which previous research shows can have negative educational and social consequences. When looking at the arrival structure as a whole, newly arrived children and young asylum seekers live a parallel life to their peers in Sweden. The longer this situation continues, the harder it is to break the cycle of exclusion, which brings us to a third challenge.

The third challenge is to initiate integration that rather than being perceived as adaptation takes instead a trans-boundary approach. Integration is a concept that needs to be defined in relation to its context and activities, including an openness to the perspectives of newly arrived children.

The fourth challenge identified concerns the reception of newly arrived children within a family, that is, those children who arrive with their parents or legal guardians. With regard to the arrival structure, newly arrived children in a family unit appear to be a more vulnerable group than unaccompanied minors. There is a greater risk that they will 'slip through the cracks' in regards to education and health care. For these children, the capacity of the parents or guardians to orient themselves and makes demands on their children's behalf is a determining factor. Since many families with children live in their own homes during the asylum period, the disconnect between the family and welfare initiatives available to all children in Sweden, regardless of immigration status, increases. This is a problem that became particularly evident in the autumn of 2015, when many families were not given the opportunity to receive individual consultations with a migration officer at the Swedish Migration Agency, in order to receive information on education and health care. Against this background, one can argue that there is a clearer structure for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in comparison with asylum seeking children in a family unit, which becomes particularly evident when the arrival structure is subjected to increased pressure. There are clearly defined responsibilities and objectives for collaboration at the national level involving the care of unaccompanied minors. This is reflected in the municipal arrival structures, which began in 2006

when municipalities were given an increased responsibility for unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. Despite a series of problems in the reception of unaccompanied minors, for example with accommodation and trustee assignment, there are actors with formal responsibility to ensure that the group has their rights fulfilled and who can be held accountable for deficiencies in the system. With regard to asylum seeking children in a family unit, the responsibility lies with the parents or other adults who must navigate the new and complex welfare system. In this sense, the reception of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors more resembles a system, with all steps subject to common laws and principles, in comparison with the reception of asylum seeking children in a family unit.

The next challenge concerns the importance of increased cooperation between the public and civil society, which has already been well identified in Sweden. Experiences from the autumn of 2015 clearly highlight the importance of the flexibility and mobility that characterises voluntary efforts for newly arrived children, and the important role that the community can play in integration. Identified barriers to access for newly arrived children, especially in the community and sporting sectors, is an important issue to address in order to ensure that the political goals of inclusiveness and meeting places within community and sporting organisations can be realised.

A sixth challenge is to address the situation arising as a result of pre-existing procurement systems within municipalities. Unaccompanied minors are entitled to a trustee and a school education in their home municipality, as well as accommodation which is procured by the municipality, whose responsibility for the care and accommodation of the minors remains. The division of responsibilities can be unclear and children in difficult situations can end up "slipping through the cracks".

A final challenge is handling the fact that the reception of asylum seekers operates as a structure rather than as a system. Each organisation has a set of objectives that guide their work and are subject to laws and regulations. Clearly defined collaboration and partnership within the arrival structure is vital to respond transparently to the differing conditions of the various organisational areas and to develop a clear division of responsibilities within the structure.

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