HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

SEEKING REFUGE

Unaccompanied Children in Sweden

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Introduction

Over 35,000 unaccompanied children sought asylum in Sweden in 2015, a stark increase over previous years.[1] Most came from countries where they faced violence and persecution. The majority are from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Iraq and Ethiopia. About half are 15 or younger, and 2,847 are girls. These children traveled on their own to Europe or became separated from their families in transit, and have often experienced trauma and violence.

Sweden has a long tradition of providing sanctuary to people in need of international protection and a well-developed system for unaccompanied asylum seeker and migrant children.

Swedish laws are generally consistent with international standards. Unaccompanied children are not detained in Sweden and are entitled by law to equal access to education. Municipalities are responsible for providing housing, health care, and education, as well as the appointment of a guardian to look after the child's interests. The Migration Agency appoints every asylum seeking child a lawyer.

However, the arrival of tens of thousands of children in 2015 has put a strain on this system. This report, based on research conducted by Human Rights Watch in Sweden from January 25 to February 8, 2016 identifies key shortcomings in the system. As a result of these shortcomings some children are not receiving the care and attention they need and to which they are entitled.

Human Rights Watch found, first, that some children, including those who had experienced sexual violence, had not received adequate health screening or mental and physical health care. Though Swedish law and policy provide that children should receive

[1] Figures are based on statistics provided by Sweden's Migration Agency. The Swedish Migration Agency, "Applications for Asylum Concerning Unaccompanied Minors Received, 2015," January 1, 2016, http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.7c00d8e6143101d166d1aab/1451894593595/Inkomna+ans%C3%B6kningar+om+asyl+2015+-+Applications+for+asylum+received+2015.pdf (accessed April 20, 2016).

Boys sit with an interpreter in the living room at a group home for unaccompanied children in Gothenburg, Sweden. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

screening and support for their mental and physical health needs, our findings suggest that children are not always receiving such care.

Second, the report finds that amid a broader backlog of asylum cases there is a lack of prioritization of applications of vulnerable unaccompanied children. As a result, some children have endured long delays in the processing of their asylum applications. Of the 44 children Human Rights Watch spoke with who had arrived in the past year, 34 said they had yet to have their asylum determination interview, including 12 who had been in Sweden for five months or more.

Third, the report identifies shortcomings in arrangements for accommodating unaccompanied child asylum seekers. Inappropriate accommodation, such as the

placement of lone girls in group housing with boys and multiple relocations, had a profound effect on some of the children interviewed for the report. Trainings for staff of group homes for unaccompanied children vary greatly, meaning that key actors responsible for the care of children sometimes lack necessary expertise.

Fourth, the report identifies shortcomings in the guardianship system. Delays in appointing guardians have impacted children's access to education, information, and support. Differences in how municipalities appoint and train guardians mean that guardians may not be sufficiently prepared to perform their role as a link between the children they care for and the Swedish system.

At the national level, the government is not taking the steps it could to provide oversight. No national agency has the responsibility to track guardianship appointments, living arrangements, school enrollment, health screenings, or assessments by social workers. This data should guide policymaking and help ensure that municipalities are fulfilling their responsibilities to care for children. Sweden's National Board of Health and Welfare told Human Rights Watch that these data are unavailable and that it has recommended that authorities be enabled to assign asylum seekers, including children, identification numbers for the purposes of tracking and collecting relevant data.[2]

Throughout a period of unprecedented numbers of arrivals starting in July 2015, Sweden made efforts to comply with its international obligations and maintain its leadership in the reception of unaccompanied children. To its credit, Sweden employed a combination of existing shelters and repurposed spaces—such as schools and hotels—rather than detain new arrivals. The Government has taken steps to understand and improve the situation of unaccompanied children. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs has appointed the Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis to assess the care provided by group homes and foster families, and appointed the National Board of Health and Welfare to conduct an analysis of the social services offered to unaccompanied children. The Board collaborated with the Children's Ombudsman to launch a website that provides information to children and young people about social services. The Ombudsman published a report on transit facilities in January 2016 and continues to do research on the situation of asylum seeking

[2] Letter from Katarina Munier, Department of Evaluation and Analysis, National Board of Health and Welfare, to Human Rights Watch, April 15, 2016.

Ammar G., a 17-year-old Syrian boy, in his room at a group home in Gothenburg, Sweden. He uses social media to communicate with relatives and friends back in Syria. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

children. As of January 1, schools across the country must carry out individualized assessments of each new student to aid educational placement and planning.

While these steps are noteworthy and welcome, more can and should be done. Arrivals have slowed but shortcomings in the system remain. Key reforms, better coordination, and improved oversight will enable children to enjoy fuller access to their rights and put them on a path to a bright future.

Recommendations

To the Swedish Government

The Government Offices, the National Board of Health and Welfare, the Migration Agency, and other relevant authorities should act to ensure that the following steps are taken:

- Evaluate oversight of and support offered to municipalities to ensure deficiencies in access to social services, health care, education, and housing are systematically assessed and improved upon.
- Ensure implementation of systems for response to gender-based violence, including immediate referrals to trained physical and mental health providers.
- Improve regulations for group home staff so that personnel who work with unaccompanied children have necessary expertise. Develop training and support programs for guardians, interpreters, group home staff, medical staff, and social workers.
- Ensure that asylum applications filed by unaccompanied children are given priority.
- Amend the Act on Guardians for Unaccompanied Minors to ensure that unaccompanied children are appointed a temporary guardian within 24 hours of arriving in the country and that guardians are adequately trained and capable of safeguarding the interests of the child. Provide for the establishment of a national database of guardians to facilitate oversight and reduce barriers to reassignment in the case of relocation. Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of professional guardianship.
- Institute a detailed and integrated system of data collection to allow for meaningful analysis of children's access to and enjoyment of their rights. The data should include information about guardianship appointments, initial meetings with social services, health screenings, and school enrollment.

To the Children's Ombudsman

In upcoming work on children on the move, consider prioritizing the monitoring of:

- The right of unaccompanied children to the highest attainable standard of health, including access to culturally-appropriate and gender sensitive mental health care and care for survivors of gender-based violence.
- The right of unaccompanied children to be heard—this should include ensuring that children are being provided with all relevant information to allow a well-informed expression of views and wishes.

To Swedish Municipalities

- Ensure that children are housed in a way that takes into account their best interests and gives due regard to their age, gender, and particular vulnerabilities.
- Ensure that accommodations have separate, secure bathing and toilet facilities for boys and girls, as well as separate, secure sleeping quarters.
- Ensure there are no unnecessary barriers to enrolling children in schools.
- Ensure all guardians have sufficient expertise and receive ongoing support. Institute mandatory trainings that prepare the guardian to act as a link between the child and specialist agencies and individuals to ensure that a child's legal, social, health, material, and educational needs are met. Adopt good practices such as in-person screenings and mentorship programs.
- Ensure that all people dealing with unaccompanied children have sufficient expertise. Assess the training of existing personnel and devise a plan to remedy gaps in training. Training should include appropriate information about: identifying and responding to the particular needs of an unaccompanied child, including indicators of sexual and gender-based violence, child and forced marriage, and trafficking and signs of mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression; countries of origin; cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication; children's rights; and asylum procedures.

Methodology

This report is based on research in seven municipalities in Sweden from January 25 to February 8, 2016 and on April 20, 2016. Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed 53 asylum seekers and refugees, of whom 50 were unaccompanied children ranging in age from 9 to 17 and three were 18-year-olds who had arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied children.

Thirty-seven of those interviewed were from Afghanistan, four from Eritrea, four from Syria, three from Somalia, two from Iraq, two from Ethiopia, and one from Yemen. We interviewed nine girls. We have used pseudonyms followed by an initial for all children and former unaccompanied children interviewees.

All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview and that their testimony might be used publicly. In all cases, Human Rights Watch told interviewees they would receive no personal service or benefit for their testimonies and that the interviews were completely voluntary and confidential.

We conducted interviews at 13 group homes for unaccompanied children, a supported apartment specifically for unaccompanied children, an apartment facility for 18- to 21-year-old refugees, an education center, and a foster home. All interviews were conducted individually. Forty-five interviews were conducted in private, two interviews were conducted in the presence of other unaccompanied children, and six were conducted in the presence of staff from the group home where the child lived.

Human Rights Watch also conducted interviews with officials who oversee accommodation for children in Skelleftea, Umea, Malmo and Gothenburg; local officials who oversee guardianships in Lulea and Umea; officials from the Migration Agency child unit in Malmo; and with officials from social services in Lulea. We also visited and interviewed staff at a health center in Malmo that treats refugee and asylum seeking children.

We also met with officials from the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and corresponded with officials from the National Board of Health and Welfare, the

Afghan boys playing soccer at a group home in Gothenburg, Sweden. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO), and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL).

Human Rights Watch interviewed, either in person or by telephone, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees officials in Stockholm and staff members of various nongovernmental organizations in Sweden including Amnesty International, Save the Children, the Red Cross, Barnrättsbyrån, Ensamkommande Forbund, the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights (RFSL), Rådgivningsbyrån för Asylsökande och Flyktingar (SWEREF), and ECPAT Sverige.

Afghan boys on a bike ride near their group home in Gothenburg, Sweden. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

In line with international instruments, the term "child" as used in this report refers to a person under the age of 18. An asylum seeker is a person who is seeking protection, but who has not yet been recognized as a refugee.

I. Lapses in Care

Nadia J. is a 16-year-old girl from Afghanistan who traveled on her own to Europe. She said she was repeatedly raped by a smuggler in Turkey.

> I didn't have any money.... [I told] the smuggler that I was alone and didn't have any money. He told me, "No problem, I can help you." The same smuggler arranged for a place where he could keep me. He kept me for 12 days. I didn't have any other choice. I didn't know the way. He had sex with me.[3]

She remained fearful throughout her journey. Once in Greece, she felt threatened by a group of boys who "pushed me and tried to get a chance to do something bad."

When we spoke with Nadia, she was living in Sweden at a home with over a dozen boys. She told her social worker she wanted to be in a group home without boys because of the rape and harassment she had experienced: "I told the social worker what happened to me. From the beginning I told them I don't want to be in a camp with the 15 boys."

Although Nadia had a general health check-up, her social worker did not refer her for post-rape care, gynecological care or psychological support.

Nadia's experience painfully illustrates the particular vulnerabilities of unaccompanied girls, and of unaccompanied children in general, as well as gaps in care and attention once they reach Sweden. Though Swedish law and policy provide that children should receive screening and support for their mental and physical health needs, our findings suggest that children are not always receiving such care.

In addition to being separated from family members, many unaccompanied children interviewed by Human Rights Watch had experienced loss, trauma, disruption, and violence. Children described the abuses and hardships they fled in their home countries. Several said they had been jailed, hurt, and tortured. Karam B., a 16-year-old boy from Syria, said ISIS held him captive for five months and forced him to watch as others were

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[3] Human Rights Watch interview with Nadia J., Malmo, February 2, 2016.

Karam B., a 16-year-old boy from Syria, pointing to equipment for the Swedish sport of floor ball in his room in a group home in Gothenburg, Sweden. He told Human Rights Watch that the sport is his new favorite hobby and helps him deal with the trauma of surviving ISIS captivity and the uncertainty of the long asylum process. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

tortured and killed.[4] Abed D., a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan, told us he went to the police after his parents died and his uncle tried to make him join the Taliban.[5] Rather than helping him, the police jailed Abed for four days. Several other children from Afghanistan said they fled to avoid being forced to join the Taliban or other armed groups. Some said they lost family members, including parents. Tekle S., a 16-year-old boy from Eritrea, told us that the government "took" his father and he did not know his whereabouts.[6] Haider J.,

[4] Human Rights Watch interview with Karam B., Gothenburg, April 20, 2016.

[5] Human Rights Watch interview with Abed E., Lulea, January 25, 2016.

[6] Human Rights Watch interview with Tekle S., Gothenburg, February 5, 2016.

16, said, "It is very hard for me to describe the feeling because I lost my father in the war and my mother had a heart problem and I had no guardian in Afghanistan."[7]

Many children interviewed by Human Rights Watch, like Nadia, experienced traumatic events while traveling alone to Sweden. Abroon N., a 13-year-old boy from Somalia, said that Libyan authorities jailed him. Pointing to his head, he told us: "When I was in jail in Libya they hit me in the head. One of them got [a] metal [rod] and he hit me…."[8] Wafa U., a 15-year-old boy from Afghanistan, said "I remember the entire journey and I can't stop the tears from coming," when he recalled the six attempts he made to cross from Greece to Italy as a stowaway.[9]

Rasoul D., a 9-year-old Afghan boy, recalled watching others die in the Mediterranean Sea: "On the way we saw many problems. I saw people who are drowning…. I was scared and I felt really bad. Still I have problems. I have nightmares about it."[10] Saare V., a 16-year-old from Ethiopia, told us his boat nearly sank during the crossing from Libya to Italy. He said he had gotten on the crowded, rickety boat because "You have no choice. If you stay in Libya, they can kill you."[11] Lana C., a 16-year-old Iraqi girl, said young men physically attacked her at the border between Serbia and Hungary.[12]

Four children told us they were separated from their families at the border between Iran and Turkey. One told us that authorities detained his parents when he and his family tried to cross at the border. [13] After being separated, he continued to Sweden with a group of other boys. Another told us that the smugglers separated him from his family at the border.[14]

Numerous children told us they had not received the physical and mental health care to which they are entitled under the Swedish system and international standards. Children should meet with a social worker from the local Social Services soon after arriving in a

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[7] Human Rights Watch interview with Haider J., Lulea, January 26, 2016.
[8] Human Rights Watch interview with Abroon N., Skelleftea, January 27, 2016.
[9] Human Rights Watch interview with Wafa U., Gothenburg, February 4, 2016.
[10] Human Rights Watch interview with Rasoul D., Malmo, February 2, 2016.
[11] Human Rights Watch interview with Saare V., Lerum, February 6, 2016.
[12] Human Rights Watch interview with Lana C., Lulea, January 25, 2016.
[13] Human Rights Watch interview with Farhard I., Lulea, January 25, 2016.
[14] Human Rights Watch interview with Abdul B., Lulea, January 25, 2016.

municipality. Social workers are supposed to assess children's needs and take appropriate steps, including referral to physical or mental health professionals. Children should also have a general health screening. Based on our interviews, guardians and staff at group homes can also flag needs for mental or physical care.

Some children said they had been in Sweden for several months without meeting with a social worker or receiving a health screening. Tabish P., a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan, said he had been in Sweden for four months and had not met with a social worker or visited a doctor.[15] Wahida N. said she had been in Sweden for two months and had not received a general health screening.[16]

These problems are consistent with our interviews with local authorities and service providers. In one municipality, an official from the department responsible for housing children told Human Rights Watch that although children should meet with a social worker within the first two weeks of arrival, the reality was that it might take two months.[17] The director of a specialized health center in Malmo that treats adult and child refugees explained that many health care centers in Sweden do not have a psychiatrist on staff to work with children.[18] As a result, children may be referred to hospitals to receive psychiatric care and placed on long waiting lists to see a psychiatrist. Karam B., who experiences flashbacks to being held captive by ISIS and has trouble sleeping, said he asked his social worker about receiving psychosocial support but has been to see a mental health specialist only once and is still experiencing problems.[19] A psychologist who works with unaccompanied children at the Malmo health center stressed that access to psychological support was crucial to the recovery of children.[20]

Human Rights Watch's interviews, both with unaccompanied girls and with Swedish officials, raised concerns that girls who have experienced gender-based violence were not properly identified or supported. Two of the nine girls we interviewed had been assaulted

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[15] Human Rights Watch interview with Tabish P., Gothenburg, February 5, 2016.
[16] Human Rights Watch interview with Wahida N., February 5, 2016.
[17] Human Rights Watch interview with Kalle Jakobsson, Deputy Unit Head, Social Welfare Office, Skelleftea, January 27, 2016.
[18] Human Rights Watch interview with Rebecka Berglund, Director, Refugee Health Center, Malmo, February 3, 2016.
[19] Human Rights Watch interview with Karam B., April 20, 2016.
[20] Human Rights Watch interview with Ann Drottberger, psychologist, Refugee Health Center, Malmo, February 3, 2016.

Nour T., a 16-year-old Syrian girl, at a group home in Gothenburg, Sweden. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

during their journey. Lana C., 16, said she had been in Sweden for seven months but spoke with us for the first time about her attack at the border between Serbia and Hungary: "I have not spoken to anyone in Sweden about this. I don't feel that I can tell, and you are the first people I am speaking to…. No one asked me."[21] Lana described her feelings, "I have been feeling very tired. I have bad dreams and don't sleep at night…. I want to start a new life." Nadia J. did tell her social worker about being repeatedly raped, but the social worker did not offer her access to post-rape medical or mental health care.

Officials in a number of municipalities told Human Rights Watch that social workers should screen for gender-based violence and other protection risks for girls and then ensure girls

[21] Human Rights Watch interview with Lana C., January 28, 2016.

receive necessary care, including through referral to specialists.[22] However, one official from Social Services in Lulea, in northern Sweden, expressed serious concerns, saying that the municipality needed to develop support services particularly suited to the needs of girls.[23]

Lack of expertise, delays, and failure to provide care are worrying given the risks that girls face in their countries of origin and on their journey. In general, unaccompanied girls are at a particular risk for gender-based violence before, during, and after migration.[24] Research by the Women's Refugee Commission in Greece and the Balkans suggests that girls are unlikely to have accessed medical and psychosocial care and safe accommodation while on the move.[25] Depending on their country of origin, some girls are at a higher risk of having undergone female genital mutilation or having experienced child or forced marriage.[26] Psychological research shows that resettled unaccompanied girls face higher risks than boys of mental health conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.[27]

Sweden can and should do more to keep its pledge to uphold the best interests of each child, including unaccompanied children. International standards, laid out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and echoed in Swedish law, require equal access to health care, individual assessments to identify particular vulnerabilities, including those deriving from violence and trauma, and measures to promote recovery and

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[22] Human Rights Watch interviews with Lene Cordes, Head, Children's Section, Social Resource Management Office, Malmo, Feb. 2, 2016; Mats Omgren and Victoria Sundling, group home managers, Umea, January 29, 2016; and Janerose Alvers, Strategist, Integration Unit, Pia Severinsson, Director, Integration Unit, and Louise Parbring, Head, Accommodation for Unaccompanied Children, Social Resource Management, Gothenburg, February 5, 2016.

[23] Human Rights Watch interview with Lena Lindahl, Social Secretary, Social Services, Lulea, January 26, 2016.

[24] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 6: Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside Their Country of Origin, UN Doc. CRC/GC/2005/6 (September 1, 2005), para. 3.

[25] Women's Refugee Commission, "Falling through the Cracks, Refugee Women and Girls in Germany and Sweden," March 2016, https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/gbv/resources/1308-protection-germany-sweden (accessed April 20, 2016), p. 9.

[26] Out of the 2,847 girls who applied for asylum in Sweden in 2015, 674 were from Afghanistan, where Human Rights Watch has documented child marriage, while 963 were from Somalia and Eritrea, countries that are reported to have a female genital mutilation prevalence rate of over eighty percent among girls and women ages 15 to 49. Asylum application figures provided by the Migration Agency. Email from Lilja Gudmundsottir, Statistics Department, Migration Agency, to Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2016. Female genital mutilation rate provided by UNICEF. UNICEF, brochure on female genital mutilation, 2016, http://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC_2016_brochure_final_UNICEF_SPREAD(2).pdf (accessed April 20, 2016).

[27] Julia Huemer et al., "Mental Health Issues in Unaccompanied Refugee Minors," Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health, vol. 3 (2009):13, accessed April 20, 2016, doi:10.1186/1753-2000-3-13, and Ilse Derluyn, Eric Broekaert and Gilberte Schuyten, "Emotional and Behavioral Problems in Migrant Adolescents in Belgium," European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, vol. 17 (2008), p. 60.

reintegration of victims of neglect, abuse, torture or armed conflicts.[28] The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the body that oversees the implementation of the CRC, has said that in order to facilitate such recovery, "culturally-appropriate and gender sensitive mental health care should be developed and qualified psychosocial counselling provided."[29] Routine screening should identify survivors of gender-based violence and result in the provision of appropriate care. Under the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention), to which Sweden is a party, states should ensure that survivors of gender-based violence have access to services facilitating their recovery from violence—including health care and social services—and that professionals are trained to assist victims and refer them to appropriate services.[30]

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[28] Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted November 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3 (entered into force September 2, 1990), arts. 24 and 39, and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, paras. 31 and 46.

[29] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, para. 48.

[30] Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), adopted April 7, 2014, CETS No.210, entered into force August 1, 2014, art. 20. Sweden ratified the Convention on July 1, 2014.

II. Lengthy Asylum Procedure

While many children described their arrival in Sweden as a relief, uncertainty about their future, exacerbated by the long wait for an asylum interview and decision, was a significant source of anxiety for many of the children interviewed by Human Rights Watch. Karam B., who said he had been in Sweden for seven months without an interview, told us that the wait for the asylum process brought back the experience of being imprisoned by ISIS: "We had little hope of living and surviving as we kept being told that they were going to kill us any day…. The waiting here for my asylum procedure and a decision reminds me of that…the insecurity of not knowing about your life and your future."[31]

Hiyab A., a 16-year-old girl from Eritrea, said her worries affected her ability to focus in the classroom. She said, "I am attending school but I can't think about it because I am worried about my papers and asylum."[32] Ammar G., a 17-year-old boy from Syria, who told us he had been waiting for eight months to receive a decision, said he was worried and spends a lot of time thinking about his application: "I have lost my appetite. I don't know where things are going."[33] Nour T., a 16-year-old girl whose parents are still in her home country of Syria, said her parents are in danger and that she wants her application processed more quickly so she can be reunited with her parents.[34]

Of the 44 children Human Rights Watch spoke with who had arrived in the past year 34 said they had yet to have their asylum determination interview, including 12 who had been in Sweden for five months or more. The ten children who had arrived in the past year and received an interview were all still awaiting a decision. Between 2009 and 2013, the average processing time for an application by an unaccompanied child was less than four and a half months.[35] Currently, the Migration Agency cannot provide individuals with estimates about how long their application may take. One official told us that

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[31] Human Rights Watch interview with Karam B., April 20, 2016.

[32] Human Rights Watch interview with Hiyab A., Farsta, February 8, 2016.

[33] Human Rights Watch interview with Ammar G., Gothenburg, February 5, 2016.

[34] Human Rights Watch interview with Nour T., Gothenburg, February 5, 2016.

[35] European Migration Network, "Policies, Practices and Data on Unaccompanied Minors in 2014 – Sweden," undated, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/reports/docs/emn-studies/unaccompanied-minors/27a_sweden_uam_national_report_en.pdf (accessed April 20, 2016), p. 8.

Wafa S., a 15-year-old boy from Afghanistan, doing his homework at a group home in Gothenburg, Sweden. He wants to continue his education but he told Human Rights Watch the long asylum process sometimes discourages him as he doesn't know what his future holds. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

unaccompanied children might wait one to two years for an application to be processed.[36] As of April 20, 2016, the Migration Agency had 31,234 pending applications from unaccompanied asylum seeking children.[37]

Another part of the problem appears to be a lack of consistent and proper information from legal representatives, guardians or the Migration Agency. While only three of the children

[36] Human Rights Watch interview with Roula Rettegi, Child Unit Team Leader, Migration Agency, Gothenburg, February 2, 2016.

[37] Letter from Monika Wendleby, director, International Department, Swedish Migration Agency, to Human Rights Watch, April 20, 2016.

Wahida N., a 16-year-old girl from Afghanistan, in Sweden for five months, anxiously awaits a decision on her asylum claim so she can continue her life. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

we spoke with said they received no information about the asylum process when they applied, many since then had turned to alternative sources such as other children or group home staff. Lana C., 16, told us she had been in Sweden for seven months and had not spoken with anyone from the Migration Agency or with a lawyer since registering her application for asylum. She said she was very worried because the staff at a previous group home had told her that she might be returned to Iraq.[38] Wahida N., a 16-year-old girl from Afghanistan who had not yet been appointed a guardian after two months in Sweden, said she was anxious because boys in her group home led her to understand that she would have to prove she was a "valuable person" in order to avoid being returned to

[38] Human Rights Watch interview with Lana C., January 25, 2016.

Afghanistan.[39] Swedish law does allow for the forcible return of unaccompanied children whose asylum applications have been rejected under certain circumstances.
The Swedish Migration Agency told Human Rights Watch that asylum applications submitted by unaccompanied children are not prioritized.[40] The Committee on the Rights of the Child has said that "[r]efugee status applications filed by unaccompanied and separated children shall be given priority and every effort should be made to render a decision promptly and fairly."[41] The relevant guidelines from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) state that, considering their vulnerability and special needs, "it is essential that [unaccompanied] children's refugee status applications be given priority."[42] Prioritization reflects the reality that the challenges children face are different than those faced by adults, and that keeping children in an insecure situation for extended periods of time can be harmful to their mental health.[43]

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[39] Human Rights Watch interview with Wahida N., Gothenburg, February 5, 2016.

[40] Ibid.

[41] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, para. 70.

[42] UNHCR, "Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum," February, 1997, http://www.unhcr.org/3d4f91cf4.pdf (accessed May 3, 2016), p.2.

[43] UNICEF, "Protecting Children on the Move," November 2015, http://www.unicef.org/emergencies/files/Refugee_and_Migrant_Crisis_Advocacy_Web_12_11_15.pdf (accessed May 3, 2016), p. 8; European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "Position on Refugee Children," http://www.ecre.org/topics/areas-of-work/protection-in-europe/116.html (accessed May 3, 2016), paras. 28-29.

III. Inadequacies in Accommodation

The large number of unaccompanied children arriving in Sweden placed an undeniable strain on municipal services. Swedish authorities have opened an extraordinary number of group homes since the beginning of 2015.[44] Human Rights Watch's research found that sometimes placements in certain group homes were inappropriate. No matter the exceptional circumstances authorities have an obligation to ensure each child's best interests, taking into account their age, gender, and particular vulnerabilities. Inappropriate living arrangements, short-term stays, and multiple relocations had a profound effect on children we interviewed.

Two girls told us they had been placed in group housing with a number of boys and no other girls. Parisa L., 15, said she had been placed in two different group homes where she was the only girl, including one where she lived for two months before another girl arrived. Lana C. was the only girl staying in a group home with over 70 boys when we interviewed her. Two other girls said they had been placed in group homes with a number of boys and only one other girl.

The girls we spoke with generally reported that they had access to gender-specific bathrooms with functioning locks, but one girl said she shared a bathroom with two boys and two others told us that sometimes boys would use the bathroom designated for girls.[45] Three girls told Human Rights Watch about harassment they faced in group homes. Nadia, who had expressed a clear desire to be housed with girls, said she felt harassed by boys in her group home on a regular basis and described the boys as "hungry, always expecting [something] from me, and feeling ownership." Mahooba O., a 17-year-old also from Afghanistan, said that she was pressured to wear a headscarf by Afghan boys in her group

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[44] From January 1, 2013 to March 1, 2016, the number of group homes increased 438 percent. As of March 1, 2016, the relevant monitoring body, the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO), was supervising a total of 1,358 group homes for unaccompanied children—more than half of which had opened in the preceding six months. Figures provided by the IVO. Email from Kristina Soderborg, Department of Analysis and Development, Health and Social Care Inspectorate, to Human Rights Watch, March 10, 2016.

[45] Swedish regulations do not require that group homes have separate, secure bathing facilities, toilets, and sleeping quarters. Regulations and General Advice on Care and Residential Homes, 2003:20, chap. 3, art. 1. These regulations are under review. Proposed new regulations would require lockable bedrooms and bathrooms, but do not address gender segregation.

home. When she refused, one boy told her he would beat her.[46] Mahooba explained that her group home had a meeting to discuss the matter, and that she chose not to file a complaint with the police because she believed the boy had psychological problems.

Human Rights Watch interviewed two 13-year-old boys who were placed in group homes where most of the children ranged in age from 15 to 17. One said that he experienced bullying and the other said that he had a problem with the boys that he thought could be related to his young age.[47] Researchers observed boys as young as 9 and 12 living in a group home with boys as old as 17. Officials in a number of municipalities explained that though they preferred to separate younger children from older children, they had not been able to take that preference into account in the fall of 2015, due to the large numbers. One official said that the reality was that they had to "deal with the children that arrive" and "fill spots."[48]

Several children Human Rights Watch spoke with described crowded spaces and poor conditions at their initial transit accommodation. One 16-year-old boy said he spent more than two weeks sleeping on a mattress on a floor in a room with over a dozen other boys.[49] Another boy said that he had not felt safe.[50] Children's comments were consistent with the findings of the Children's Ombudsman of Sweden, who documented problematic living conditions at transit accommodations in a January 2016 report.[51]

Children described problems related to multiple relocations. Three of these children told Human Rights Watch they had not been informed that an interim arrangement was only a temporary measure while another municipality expanded its capacity to accommodate children. We met these children within a week of relocation and observed their distress and confusion. Other children told Human Rights Watch they had bonded with temporary

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[46] Interview with Mahooba O., Skelleftea, January 27, 2016.

[47] Human Rights Watch interviews with Abroon N., January 27, 2016, and Ghulam B., Nordmaling, January 31, 2016.

[48] Human Rights Watch interview with Lene Cordes, February 2, 2016.

[49] Human Rights Watch interview with Ilhan A., Nordmaling, January 30, 2016.

[50] Human Rights Watch interview with Hashem Q., Umea, January 28, 2016.

[51] The Children's Ombudsman, "Barn på flykt: Barns och ungas röster om motagandet av ensamkommande. Barnombudsmannen," January 21, 2016, http://www.barnombudsmannen.se/globalassets/dokument-for-nedladdning/publikationer/barn-pa-flykt---barns-och-ungas-roster-om-mottagandet-av-ensamkommande.pdf (accessed April 20, 2016).

guardians only to be relocated, and others had not been enrolled in school or assigned guardians in the interim period.

Abed E., a 14-year-old from Afghanistan, said he fled to Sweden after his mother died of cancer and the Taliban killed his father and brother. He was placed with a foster family. He said he really liked the family and that "the mom was like a mom" to him.[52] Abed thought that he would stay with the family until he was an adult, but after a month, he was transferred to a group home. There, he said staff told him he would return to the family, but instead, after a month at the group home, he was relocated again to a group home in another municipality. He said, "[T]hey kept telling me I would go back to the family, but then they sent me here. Why did they lie?"[53]

Faisal H., a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan, said that after three weeks at a transit facility, he was placed with a foster family. He said he spent two months with the family and thought that he would live there until he was an adult. Faisal said he was "really happy" with the family and that they helped him "all the time and it was easy."[54] Faisal described the day he was told he would be moved: "Everything happened suddenly…it was just an hour or two…..I met this social worker and they told me it was compulsory I had to leave." He told us, "I was very sad. I just started my new life."

Sweden should ensure that children have continuity of care and can live in housing where they feel safe. In keeping with recommendations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and guidelines issued by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UNHCR, Swedish authorities should make every effort to base decisions on accommodation for unaccompanied children on their best interests, taking into account their age, gender, background, and any particular vulnerabilities.[55] Under the Istanbul Convention, states should ensure that survivors of gender-based violence have access to safe accommodation.[56] Guidelines issued by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (which includes UNHCR and UNICEF) state that to protect against the risk of gender-based

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[52] Human Rights Watch interview with Abed E., January 25, 2016.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Human Rights Watch interview with Faisal H., Lulea, January 26, 2016.

[55] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, para. 40. UNHCR and UNICEF, "Safe and Sound: What States Can Do to Ensure Respect for the Best Interests of Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Europe," October 2014, http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5423da264.pdf (accessed April 20, 2016), p. 16.

[56] Istanbul Convention, art. 23.

violence, accommodation for unaccompanied children should be arranged in a way that ensures privacy for girls and boys, including by utilizing sex-segregated bathrooms and sleeping areas.[57] Officials in Gothenburg expressed to Human Rights Watch the view that gender-integrated housing could foster healthy attitudes about gender equality.[58] However, while the availability of gender-integrated housing does not contravene international standards, failing to take into account the gender ratio at particular facilities, and a child's views and vulnerabilities, may.

In the effort to open new homes to meet the surge in need, Swedish authorities in some municipalities eliminated hiring criteria and abridged trainings. Officials in Umea, in northern Sweden, and in Malmo told us they removed a requirement that staff have a degree in a relevant field.[59] An official in Malmo told us the municipality had to look for people with a "good heart and sensitive people."[60]

Standards for trainings vary widely. In Umea, staff are not required to attend any training before they begin work.[61] In Skelleftea, in northern Sweden, staff must shadow workers for a minimum of two days before they can begin.[62] Researchers met a staff member in Nordmaling, near Skelleftea, who said he was beginning his first day of work after three days of "on the job" training. The appropriateness of such training needs to be considered in light of the increasing proportion of inexperienced staff. A group home manager in Lulea explained that at a home she had just opened, the staff of 15 was comprised of two experienced staff members and 13 new hires.[63] In Malmo, where the requirement for a relevant degree was removed, officials also redesigned trainings by introducing an abbreviated half-day training unit and allowing staff to attend the training at some point after they began work.[64]

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[57] Inter-Agency Standing Committee, "Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery," 2015, http://gbvguidelines.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-IASC-Gender-based-Violence-Guidelines_lo-res.pdf (accessed April 29, 2016), p. 84.

[58] Human Rights Watch Interview Janerose Alvers, Pia Severinsson, and Louise Parbring, February 5, 2016.

[59] Human Rights Watch interview with Lene Cordes, February 2, 2016 and email from Omgren to Human Rights Watch, March 24, 2016.

[60] Human Rights Watch interview with Lene Cordes, February 2, 2016.

[61] Email from Mats Omgren, HVB manger, Umea, to Human Rights Watch, March 24, 2016.

[62] Email from Linda Larsson, Unit Head, Social Welfare Office, Skelleftea, to Human Rights Watch, March 18, 2016.

[63] Human Rights Watch interview with Sarah Eriksson, HVB Home Manager, Lulea, January 26, 2016.

[64] Human Rights Watch interview with Lene Cordes, February 2, 2016.

Some municipalities offer more robust training programs, though it is not clear that all staff are able to fully benefit. In Gothenburg for example, local officials said that all staff members undergo a two-week training before a home is opened and that the municipality offers ongoing, specialized trainings that provide staff with knowledge about countries of origin and particular vulnerabilities.[65] However, staff at one group home said they had not had an opportunity to attend these specialized trainings.[66]

The National Board of Health and Welfare previously required that group home managers have an appropriate post graduate degree, but as of January 1, 2016, this requirement has been waived on a temporary basis.[67] The regulations for staff at group homes are very general: staff are required to have the training, experience, and personal qualifications "required to perform the work," but there is no specification about what constitutes sufficient training or experience.[68] Indeed, the Board does not currently have the authority to ensure that staff receive specialized trainings.[69] These regulations are currently under review.[70]

Lowering hiring and training standards can have a real impact on children. Three children told Human Rights Watch they felt that particular staff members were insensitive or even racist, and a fourth told us that the staff made jokes about the children that made him feel uncomfortable. Nadeem W., a 17-year-old Muslim boy from Afghanistan who spent several years living in Iran described a conflict with a staff member from the group home. He told us that a staff member entered his room without permission and walked across the area where the child prayed with his shoes on. Nadeem said that the same staff member called the police when he refused to turn down his music: "I said if you call the police, I will commit suicide. When I saw the police, I could not speak at all because I've been in Iran and I have seen the police there…."[71]

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65 Human Rights Watch interview with Janerose Alvers, Louise Parbring, and Pia Severinsson, February 5, 2016.

66 Human Rights Watch group interview with staff, HVB group home, Gothenburg, February 4, 2016.

67 Email from Katarina Munier, Department of Evaluation and Analysis, National Board of Health and Welfare, to Human Rights Watch, April 29, 2016.

68 Ibid.

69 Letter from Munier, April 15, 2016.

70 Email from Munier, April 29, 2016.

71 Human Rights Watch interview with Nadeem W., Umea, January 29, 2016.

One girl raised her concern about the risk of sexual violence or abuse by personnel at the group homes. Makai P., a 17-year-old from Afghanistan, said she had had a problem with a staff member at her transit accommodation: "There was a man on the staff… he would say I'm 'not alone,' that I was 'hiding something.' I don't know why he said that, but it was very strange for me. I felt scared of him. When he was working I wouldn't go to the kitchen."[72]

Children also told us they had problems communicating with staff in homes because they did not have regular access to interpreters. Nabil U., a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan, said he was not able to explain his problems to staff at the group home where he was accommodated and that he had spoken only once in two months to the two staff members assigned as his "contact" staffers, who have the primary responsibility for getting to know him and his needs. "We couldn't speak because the other times there is no interpreter," he said.[73] Making interpreters available is key to ensuring the communication and trust that are necessary for a child to express his or her views and be properly heard.[74] Both male and female interpreters should be available to ensure that boys and girls can communicate through someone of the same gender if they prefer. This can be especially important when discussing sensitive issues such as gender-based violence.

International standards note the importance of expertise for those who work with unaccompanied children, including staff at group homes. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has said that specialized training is important for those who deal with unaccompanied children and that such training should include information about the country of origin, child development and psychology, and cultural sensitivity.[75]

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[72] Human Rights Watch interview with Makai P., Skelleftea, January 27, 2016.

[73] Human Rights Watch interview with Nabil U., Umea, January 29, 2016.

[74] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, para. 25.

[75] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, paras. 95-96.

IV. Deficiencies in the Guardian System

> It's not easy to have contact with my guardian. …He did not ask about me personally, he didn't ask me about how I feel. He asked me what country I am from. I did not think the questions were connected at all with my problems.[76]
>
> - Majeed R., a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan

In Sweden, guardians play a crucial role in the lives of unaccompanied children. Recruited and appointed locally, guardians are supposed to ensure children's best interests, access to benefits and services, and advocate on their behalf. Guardians' precise responsibilities vary depending on the municipality, but it is common for a guardian to disburse government-provided support funds and to provide information about the Swedish system and culture. In some municipalities, a guardian must be present for a child to meet with a social worker or receive a health screening. In others, a guardian is the only person formally able to enroll a child in school.

Human Rights Watch research found that delays in appointing guardians impacted children's access to education, information, and support. In the absence of uniform standards, considerable differences in practices for appointing and training guardians mean they may lack important expertise.

We interviewed 11 children who said they had no guardian. Among those, 10 said they had been in the country for a month or more. Five said they had been in the country for three months or more. We also spoke with 10 other children who had arrived in the past year and said they waited a month or more for a guardian. We spoke with three children who had been relocated to a new municipality and had not yet been appointed new guardians.

Four children told us they were prevented from enrolling in school because they did not have a guardian. Isah G., a 13-year-old boy who said he had been in Sweden for a month told us "I have asked why I don't go to school and staff told me to wait until I get a

[76] Human Rights Watch interview with Majeed R., Umea, January 28, 2016.

Tabish P., a 16-year-old boy from Afghanistan, practices reading Swedish at a group home in Gothenburg. Tabish told Human Rights Watch he was in Sweden for over four months before he was appointed a guardian, met with a social worker, or visited a doctor. © 2016 Lydia Gall/Human Rights Watch

guardian so he can arrange school for me."[77] Yama H., a 12-year-old boy who said he had been in Sweden for three months described how he felt while he waited to enroll in school: "I'm not happy about the fact that I have been here for three months without doing anything. If I had a guardian I could have started studying and make something of myself."[78] Local officials in Umea and Nordmaling told us that, as the rate of arrivals increased and the delay in appointment of guardians began to significantly affect

[77] Human Rights Watch interview with Isah G., Gothenburg, February 2, 2016.

[78] Human Rights Watch interview with Yama H., Gothenburg, February 2, 2016.

enrollment, informal arrangements were made with local school authorities so that staff from group homes could enroll children.[79]

In some municipalities, local officials and staff members devised ad hoc solutions to address children's needs. Two children in Farsta, near Stockholm, explained they were appointed a staff member from the home to "act like your guardian" while they waited two to three months for a guardian.[80] The staff member ensured that the children received a health screening, met with a social worker, and were able to purchase clothing. Faisal H., a 16-year-old from Afghanistan, said staff in his group home in Lulea were giving him basic supplies on a temporary basis because without a guardian he did not have pocket money.[81]

The increase in the number of unaccompanied children put a strain on municipalities, which already had varying practices for selecting and training guardians. Under the Swedish system, guardians are recruited from the general public and appointed by the local chief guardian's office. Guardians are not professionals; they receive a stipend as reimbursement for acting on behalf of the child's best interests. Swedish law requires only that guardians be "honest, experienced and suitable."[82]

Chief guardians may or may not require an in-person meeting with applicants. Officials from the chief guardian's office in Lulea, in northern Sweden, told us they had discontinued the use of personal screening interviews.[83] Officials in Umea said that they held screening meetings, which in the past were attended by one to two people but now might be attended by as many as 25 people. [84]

Training practices vary widely. Gothenburg provides a mandatory, multi-day training program that includes representatives from Save the Children, an adult education

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[79] Human Rights Watch interviews with Kristin Lindberg, Nordmaling, HVB Operations, January 31, 2016, and Mats Omgren and Victoria Sundling, January 29, 2016.

[80] Human Rights Watch interview with Nahom Y. and Hiyab A., Farsta, February 8, 2016.

[81] Human Rights Watch interview with Faisal H., January 26, 2016.

[82] The Act on Guardians for Unaccompanied Minors, No. 429 of 2005, arts. 3-4, and the Children and Parents Code, No. 381 of 1949, chap. 11, art. 12.

[83] Human Rights Watch group interview with Inger Faltros and staff, Chief Guardian's office, Lulea, January 26, 2016.

[84] Human Rights Watch group interview with Anita Konstantis and staff, Chief Guardian's office, Umea, January 29, 2016.

program, and the municipality.[85] Gothenburg also runs a mentorship program that pairs new guardians with more experienced ones. [86] Umea does not offer or require guardians to attend any training, but the chief guardian's office recommends that people who are considering applying review an online training developed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL).[87] The final report of an EU-funded project on Sweden's approach to unaccompanied children cited two guardians in two different municipalities saying that their training had consisted of a recommended book that did not adequately prepare them for their role and responsibilities.[88]

Guardians may have responsibility for too many children. Amir F., an 18-year-old from Afghanistan, explained that he had difficulties with the guardian he was assigned when he arrived in 2014: "[He] was busy, was working in two places and I believe he had many children…. I didn't get so much help from him because I got all the information…by myself." [89]

With no limit to the number of children a guardian may have responsibility for set in national law, the situation varies among municipalities. In Lulea, staff from the chief guardian's office told Human Rights Watch that a guardian might be allowed to take responsibility for up to five children, but staff in the Umea office said they had an informal cap of 12.[90]

There is no national database of guardians, making it effectively impossible to see if an applicant has taken on responsibility for children in other municipalities. Staff from the chief guardian's office in Lulea explained that the absence of a database also led to delays in appointing new guardians for children relocated from one municipality to another.[91]

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[85] Connect, "One Plus One Equals Three: a Mapping of the Reception and Protection of Unaccompanied Children in Sweden," 2014, http://www.connectproject.eu/PDF/CONNECT-SWE_Report.pdf (accessed April 20, 2016), p. 22.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Human Rights Watch group interview with Anita Konstantis and staff, January 29, 2016, and Swedish Association Local Authorities and Regions, "Online Education – Actors Responsible for Unaccompanied Children," undated, https://adobeconnect.skl.se/ensamkommande-barn/ (accessed April 20, 2016).

[88] Connect, "One Plus One Equals Three: a Mapping of the Reception and Protection of Unaccompanied Children in Sweden," http://www.connectproject.eu/PDF/CONNECT-SWE_Report.pdf, p. 22.

[89] Human Rights Watch interview with Amir F., Lulea, January 25, 2016.

[90] Human Rights Watch group interviews with Inger Faltros and staff, January 26, 2016, and Anita Konstantis and staff, January 29, 2016.

[91] Human Rights Watch group interview with Inger Faltros and staff, January 26, 2016.

Without the database, municipal offices cannot readily identify and contact existing guardians, who must give their consent for guardianship to be transferred.

Sweden's guardianship system can be improved to fully realize the country's commitment under the Convention on the Rights of the Child to provide special protection and assistance to unaccompanied children.[92] The Committee on the Rights of the Child considers the prompt appointment of a guardian a "practical measure" to protect children from risks like trafficking that could jeopardize a child's right to life, survival, and development.[93] In March 2015, the Committee expressed concern that the Swedish Act on Guardians for Unaccompanied Minors, does not impose a firm appointment timeframe or training requirements.[94] Noting that at that time children were sometimes waiting several weeks before a guardian was appointed, and that guardians were not always properly trained, the Committee recommended that Sweden "[r]equire by law that each unaccompanied minor is immediately appointed a guardian who is adequately trained and receives regular ongoing training."[95] States should ensure that access to education is maintained during all phases of displacement and that children are registered with appropriate authorities as soon as possible.[96]

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[92] Interpreting CRC articles 18(2) and 20(1), the Committee explained, "States are required to create the underlying legal framework and take necessary measures to secure proper representation of an unaccompanied or separated child's best interests. Therefore, States should appoint a guardian or adviser as soon as the unaccompanied or separated child is identified." The Committee also said, "the appointment of a competent guardian as expeditiously as possible serves as a key procedural safeguard to ensure respect for the best interests of an unaccompanied or separated child." UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, paras. 33 and 21.

[93] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, paras. 23-24.

[94] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "Concluding observations on the fifth period report of Sweden," CRC/C/SWE/CO/5, March 6, 2015, para. 49(d).

[95] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, "Concluding observations on the fifth period report of Sweden," March 6, 2015, para. 50(d).

[96] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.6, paras. 41-42.

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SEEKING REFUGE

Unaccompanied Children in Sweden

Sweden has traditionally been a leader in providing protection to unaccompanied children, but an unprecedented rise in the number of arrivals put a strain on the system. Over 35,000 unaccompanied children sought asylum in Sweden in 2015, a stark increase over past years. Many children fled countries like Afghanistan and Syria where they faced conflict, persecution and hardship, and traveled on their own to Europe or became separated from their families in transit. Many experienced further traumas during the journey, including violence at the hands of smugglers, abusive authorities, and others.

Seeking Refuge: Unaccompanied Children in Sweden, based on interviews with 50 children, national and local officials, and service providers, documents shortcomings in the system that mean children are experiencing delays and difficulties accessing critical social services, physical and mental health care, and appropriate housing. Gender-specific needs of girls are not sufficiently identified or addressed. Inadequacies in the guardianship system leave children without a vital source of support and information, and can impede their access to education. Amidst a backlog of cases, the government has not prioritized the applications of these vulnerable children.

Sweden has taken noteworthy steps to meet the challenges, but it can and should do more. Human Rights Watch calls on the Swedish government to institute key reforms and improve oversight so that children can be guaranteed better access to their rights and be put on a path to a bright future.

Tekle S., a 16-year-old Eritrean boy, looking out a window in his group home in Gothenburg, Sweden.

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