



Report 2016:28



Länsstyrelsen
Stockholm

Lost in Migration

A Report on Missing Unaccompanied
Minors in Sweden

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Author: Avin Ali Akbar, Anna-Karin Gustafsson, Mats Kullander, Lisa Tønnes Lönnroos,
Natalie Verständig

For further information contact:

Amir Hashemi-Nik, Labour Market and Civil Rights Unit

Petra Tammert Seidefors, Labour Market and Civil Rights Unit

Länsstyrelsen i Stockholm/County Administrative Board of Stockholm

Regeringsgatan 66

Box 22067

104 22 Stockholm

Phone: +46 10 223 10 00

www.lansstyrelsen.se/stockholm

Foreword

On 28 January 2016, the County Administrative Boards of Sweden received a government assignment concerning missing unaccompanied minors, until the end of 2017.

The County Administrative Boards were assigned to conduct a national mapping of unaccompanied minors, who go missing in Sweden, and to analyse and propose measures to prevent them from disappearing.

This national mapping is a step in the right direction to create a comprehensive picture of why children go missing and what steps need to be taken to prevent this. The County Administrative Boards and other actors will continue working on disseminating the mapping and implementing these efforts in 2017, as a part of the national assignment.

It can be said that there has been a lack of knowledge and information about what happens with children who go missing and what the reasons are for the disappearances. We have made some progress, but it is a complex issue and we have to continue gathering information to be able to keep children from becoming victims.

Regardless of the reasons why children go missing and the degree of free will involved in the disappearances, there is an imminent risk that these children fare poorly. They are in a vulnerable situation and live outside the system. Through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sweden has committed to protect all children who are in the country regardless of their legal status.

In light of this, regional networks of authorities and NGOs have been initiated by the county administrative boards in a number of counties. The aim is to prevent unaccompanied minors from going missing and for collaboration to be more effective when it does happen.

Through the government project, the importance of the regional level has become clear. The county administrative board plays a unique role as a link between the national and local levels.

However, regardless of how well we work regionally, we will not be able to effectively counter the disappearances if we do not do so together, focusing on the best interests of the child, at all levels.

This mapping provides us with collective knowledge and shall constitute a support in moving forward.

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Introduction

In January 2016, the County Administrative Boards of Sweden were given a government assignment concerning unaccompanied minors who go missing.¹ The County Administrative Boards were assigned to, in cooperation with other relevant authorities and actors, conduct a national mapping of unaccompanied minors who go missing and propose measures to the government to prevent unaccompanied minors from going missing. Results and methods shall be shared with authorities, municipalities, county councils and other concerned actors. This mapping shall accordingly form the basis of the continued work on the national assignment concerning unaccompanied minors who go missing.

Background

In recent years, the number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Sweden has increased. Autumn 2015 entailed major changes, both for the thousands of people seeking to resume their lives in Sweden, as well as for those who work in the reception system. In total, around 163,000 individuals applied for asylum in Sweden during the year, of whom 35,000 were unaccompanied minors.

In their most recent reviews of Sweden, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UN Human Rights Committee have directed criticism at the numbers of unaccompanied minors going missing after arriving in Sweden. In May 2016, 1,829 unaccompanied minors seeking asylum were registered with the Swedish Migration Agency as missing. Some of these children return to resume their asylum process, while others leave the country. However, there are unaccompanied minors that remain missing. At the same time, there are unaccompanied minors who do not seek asylum and rarely come into contact with Swedish authorities. The lack of a collective view of the asylum-seeking children who go missing, and the deficient state of knowledge about the children who are in Sweden without seeking asylum forms the basis of this mapping.

In autumn 2015, the government presented a proposal on temporary legislation with the aim of reducing the number of people seeking asylum in Sweden. Some of these changes may have consequences for unaccompanied minors, which may lead to an increased risk of them going missing. On 20 July 2016, a new law entered into effect, which among other things limited the possibility of obtaining a permanent residence permit and the possibility of family reunification. In addition to this, a change in the Reception of Asylum Seekers Act was introduced on 1 June 2016 that means that the right

¹ Government decision II:4, 28 January 2016, S2016/00634/FST.

to financial assistance in the form of daily allowance and housing ended for those aged 18 and over whose asylum claims have been rejected or who have received deportation decisions and where the time limit for voluntary return exit had run out.²

On 17 December 2015, the Swedish Parliament also decided to introduce ID checks on ferries, trains and buses to Sweden, which has been implemented since the turn of the year. As many of the unaccompanied minors who come to Sweden often do not have ID, it is likely that this change has consequences for this group.

Oxford Research was commissioned by the County Administration Board of Stockholm to conduct a national mapping of unaccompanied minors who go missing. The national mapping is a part of the government project that the County Administrative Boards received regarding unaccompanied minors who go missing.³ The government tasked the County Administrative Boards to analyse and propose measures to prevent unaccompanied minors from going missing and to distribute results and methods to authorities, municipalities, county councils and other concerned actors. The assignment is being carried out in collaboration with the Swedish Migration Agency, the Police Authority, the National Board of Health and Welfare, the National Agency for Education and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), and will also gather knowledge from the Ombudsman for Children and volunteer organisations with special expertise in the area. The County Administrative Board of Stockholm has the coordinating role and the responsibility for reporting on the assignment. The purpose of this study is to map the group of unaccompanied minors who go missing and to provide recommendations for the construction of a national action plan in the work with children who go missing.

This report consistently applies both a child perspective and the child's perspective. The child perspective is based on the best interests of the child from an adult perspective and the child's perspective is the child's own views. Consideration of children is not the same thing as the child's perspective, which is why both perspectives are used.

Actors in the reception of unaccompanied minors

To facilitate the understanding of the mapping and obstacles in the reception of unaccompanied minors, an introduction is provided here of the various actors in the reception of unaccompanied minors and their respective roles and mandates.

² Exceptions can be made if the person is responsible for a child or if it is otherwise unreasonable.

³ Government decision, Assignment regarding unaccompanied minors who go missing (ref. no. S2016/00634/FST).

The Municipality

When an unaccompanied minor arrives in Sweden and applies for asylum, in accordance with the Social Services Act, the child is offered temporary housing in the municipality where the child presents him or herself to a Swedish authority. In the **municipality of arrival**, the **Social Services Administration** bears the responsibility of placing the child in a so-called **transit shelter** (also known as arrival housing) until a time where the child can move to the assigned municipality. Social workers from the arrival municipality meet with the child during the time that he or she is in the municipality.

The municipality that the child is later assigned to becomes responsible, through the assignment, for taking the child into care based on the Social Services Act. **The Social Services Administration in the assigned municipality** is responsible for placing the child in suitable housing, usually a **foster home** or a **group shelter/treatment home**. However, the assigned municipality can place the child in a shelter in another municipality. In other words, the assigned municipality and the municipality of residence can be different. However, it is still the assigned municipality that shall be seen as the municipality of presence according to the Social Services Act. The assigned municipality is also responsible for ensuring that the child has access to schooling facilities and to ensure the child receives dental and medical care. The child is assigned a social worker in the assigned municipality. If the child is placed at a group shelter, he or she is assigned a contact person there.

A **legal guardian** is appointed by the Chief Guardian/Chief Guardian Committee in the municipality where the child is present. The legal guardian works on a voluntary basis and represents the child in the capacity of both the custodian and guardian. The legal guardian makes decisions that concern the child's personal, financial and legal affairs. The municipality is responsible for the child's integration and establishment if the child receives a residence permit.

Swedish Migration Agency

The Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for the asylum process and holds the investigation interview with the child, legal guardian and the child's legal representative/public counsel. Once the asylum application has been made, the Swedish Migration Agency **assigns** the child to a municipality. Once the Swedish Migration Agency has assigned a municipality, the child is considered to be present in that municipality in the sense referred to in the Social Services Act.⁴

In January 2016, the Swedish Migration Agency was assigned to develop a new model for the assignment of asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors. In the new model, unaccompanied minors are assigned to one of Sweden's municipalities based on a set percentage.⁵ After municipality assignment, the

⁴ Ch. 2 a Sect. 1 of the Social Services Act (2001:453).

⁵ Assignment to a municipality that the child has a tie to may occur, but shall be done within the scope of the percentage. On the long term, the new model for municipality assignment shall contribute to the distribution of unaccompanied minors being more even across Sweden's municipalities.

Swedish Migration Agency decides **whether asylum will be granted or refused**, and in cases when a rejection decision has gained legal force, can organise the return to the home country.

On 20 July 2016, a new law entered into effect that meant that temporary residence permits (TUT) are granted for everyone in need of protection except quota refugees. The temporary residence permits are extended if a need for protection remains, but only become permanent for those who can meet maintenance requirements.⁶ The new law also limits the possibility of family reunification.

The Swedish Parliament decided in April 2016 to introduce a change to the Reception of Asylum Seekers Act (LMA)⁷ meaning that the person who has applied for asylum and received a legally enforceable decision of rejection or deportation no longer has the right to housing and daily allowance from the Swedish Migration Agency. For asylum-seeking unaccompanied young people who have turned 18, this means that the Swedish Migration Agency also may not provide compensation to municipalities or county councils for costs after the right to financial assistance according to LMA has ended.⁸

The Police

The Police come into contact with unaccompanied minors at border crossings at entry and exit and when there is a suspicion that he or she is a victim or perpetrator of a crime. If a person receives a negative decision on their application for asylum and does not voluntarily leave the country, the Swedish Migration Agency can turn the matter over to the Police who have the right to use force for a deportation. In addition, the Police encounter missing unaccompanied minors through outreach activities in high-risk environments. The police also accept missing persons reports about children who have gone missing and are responsible for the investigation of these cases.

Volunteer organisations

A number of volunteer organisations come into contact with unaccompanied minors through, for example, outreach activities in high-risk environments, social activities, homework help, legal advice, support in contacts with authorities, etc. Examples of volunteer organisations that come into contact with unaccompanied minors are the Children's Rights Agency, Save the Children, the Red Cross, Skyddsvärnet, Stadsmissionerna and a number of associations started by and for unaccompanied minors (including Ensamkommandes förbund and the Swedish Association for Unaccompanied Minors).

⁶ Government of Sweden (2016). *Proposal to temporarily limit the possibility of obtaining a residence permit in Sweden*. Available via: <http://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2016/04/forslag-om-att-tillfalligt-begransa-mojligheten-att-fa-uppehallsstillstand-i-sverige>

⁷ Reception of Asylum Seekers Act (1994:137) Sections 11 and 12

⁸ Swedish Migration Agency (2016). *Change in the right to financial assistance under LMA*. Available via: <http://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Nya-lagar-2016/Andring-av-ratt-till-bistand-enligt-LMA.html>

Method

This mapping is primarily based on an exhaustive survey in the form of a questionnaire sent to the social services in all of Sweden's municipalities. A selection of them were also interviewed to map the scope of the disappearances of unaccompanied minors and to understand the profile of children who go missing. Statistics from the Swedish Migration Agency were also collected and compiled. Last, but not least, unaccompanied minors' own accounts were gathered from the Children's Rights Agency and Stockholms Stadsmission's project BABA and Skånes Stadsmission's Unaccompanied minors project. Representatives from these volunteer organisations have also been interviewed.

Collection and compilation of statistics

Statistics on children who have gone missing before municipality assignment

As the Swedish Migration Agency does not compile statistics on unaccompanied minors who go missing in the arrival phase⁹, this information has been gathered via the municipality questionnaire mentioned above. The supply of information is very limited, and of varying quality at the various municipalities. This information is thereby only treated as qualitative data.

Statistics on children who have gone missing after municipality assignment

The Swedish Migration Agency keeps statistics on unaccompanied minors who go missing. This applies only to unaccompanied minors who have been assigned to a municipality. The data also includes information on the children's gender, age and nationality.

It is not possible to link children who go missing to the municipality the child has been placed in (i.e. the municipality the child went missing from). However, what is apparent from the statistics is the child's assigned municipality, meaning the municipality that is responsible for the child. In the mapping, we have therefore chosen to look at unaccompanied minors who at a certain point in time (31 May 2016) were registered as missing, and linked this to the municipalities the children were assigned to. This has been done for the children who received a municipal assignment between 2013 and 2016.¹⁰ In other words, this is a snapshot of the number of unaccompanied minors registered as missing at the end of May 2016.

⁹ The arrival phase is defined as the time from a child applying for, or expressing an intention to apply for, asylum - until the child has been sent to an assigned municipality. During this process, the child is registered with the Swedish Migration Agency, but there are cases where children have gone missing before the first meeting with the Swedish Migration Agency.

¹⁰ For those children assigned before 2013, it is not possible to see which municipality was the assigned municipality.

Mapping of unaccompanied minors who go missing

This chapter presents the, often limited, knowledge available concerning children who go missing. The chapter consists of two parts, the first of which presents an account of children who go missing during the arrival phase, and the second presents an account of children who go missing after municipality assignment.

Children who go missing in the arrival phase

There is limited knowledge regarding unaccompanied minors who go missing during the arrival phase, i.e. from when they arrive to Sweden until they are assigned a municipality; a process that can take from 24 hours up to a few weeks. As previously mentioned, there is no data collected on these children by the Swedish Migration Agency. It is therefore up to the municipalities where the child first comes into contact with a Swedish authority to register children who go missing.

In the questionnaire, the respondents are asked to provide information on unaccompanied minors who have gone missing in the arrival phase. Of the 255 municipalities that responded to the questionnaire, 35 per cent had unaccompanied children that were placed in arrival housing at some time between 2013 to May 2016. Of them, nearly half (46 per cent) say that at least one child had gone missing.

Causes of disappearance in the arrival phase

The lack of information about unaccompanied minors who went missing in the arrival phase also means that it is difficult to speak about the causes of why children go missing. In interviews, it emerges that, insofar as there is knowledge about what happened to the children who went missing, the information most often comes from the child's friends who are still at the shelter where they lived, and have contact with the child who went missing via e.g. social media.

According to the questionnaire, the most common alleged cause is that the child wants to go to a different municipality. During the interviews, it emerged that this was especially common in autumn 2015. The questionnaire results also showed that common alleged causes were "distrust/fear of authorities" and that the child did not intend to seek asylum.

Another factor that can play a role in whether or not children go missing in the arrival phase is if they have received complete and correct information about how the asylum process works. This is emphasized in several municipalities in the interviews. Insufficient information causes, for example,

some children to go missing to joint friends or relatives, believing that they will not be able to do so after municipality assignment.

A mapping that the County Administration Board of Stockholm prepared indicates that unaccompanied minors in the arrival phase are a special risk group in terms of human trafficking. For example, it happens that children who come to Sweden without a guardian are, or are at risk of, being exploited by the same person who smuggled them into the country. Sometimes this has occurred before the children come into contact with Swedish authorities.¹¹

In summary, there does not just seem to be a lack of documentation about who goes missing, but there also seems to be an uncertainty about *why* children go missing in the arrival phase. This can partly be related to the major increase in the number of unaccompanied minors that came to Sweden in 2015, and a difficulty for several municipalities to have an overview of the unaccompanied minors who arrived. The lack of knowledge about children in the arrival phase can also impede the prevention work and create obstacles in the collaboration between different actors regarding the individuals who go missing.

Children who go missing after municipal assignment

There is more information about the unaccompanied minors who received a municipal assignment from the Swedish Migration Agency than the children who are in the arrival phase. In this section, the Swedish Migration Agency's statistics on the number of children assigned a municipality between 2013 and 2016 (until the end of May) and were registered as missing at 31 May 2016.¹²

Of the total number of unaccompanied minors who received a municipality assignment, the percentage of missing children is low. From 2013 to the end of May 2016, just over 45,000 unaccompanied minors received a municipality assignment, of whom 4 per cent were registered as missing at the Swedish Migration Agency at 31 May 2016. While this is a small percentage, it nonetheless involves a significant number of individuals – 1,829 who were missing at this time – and it is also important to keep in mind that this is only a snapshot and that more disappearances happened during the period in question.

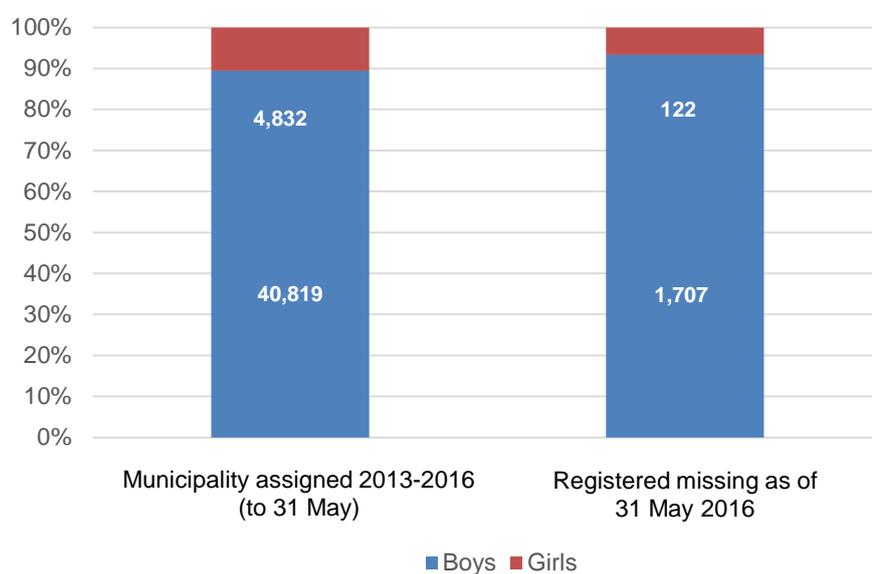
¹¹ County Administrative Board of Stockholm, *Human trafficking with children – national survey 2012-2015* (Report 2015:30).

¹² Due to different definitions of those *missing* at the Swedish Migration Agency and at the municipalities, fewer municipalities in the questionnaire stated that they had missing minors after 2013 than according to data held by the Swedish Migration Board. This may also be due to a lack of knowledge among those who completed the questionnaire or those who were assigned to the municipality received housing in a different municipality and there is therefore a lack of awareness of how many of those assigned had gone missing.

Patterns regarding gender, nationality and age

The statistics show that disappearances are more common among certain groups of unaccompanied minors than others. Boys are overrepresented among asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors in general; in 2013-2016¹³, 89 per cent of the unaccompanied minors who received a municipality assignment were boys. Among the minors who were registered as missing in May 2016, 93 per cent were boys; in other words, boys were somewhat overrepresented among those missing.

Figure 1 The percentage of girls and boys who received a municipality assignment 2013-2016 and were registered as missing at 31 May 2016. Source: Swedish Migration Agency

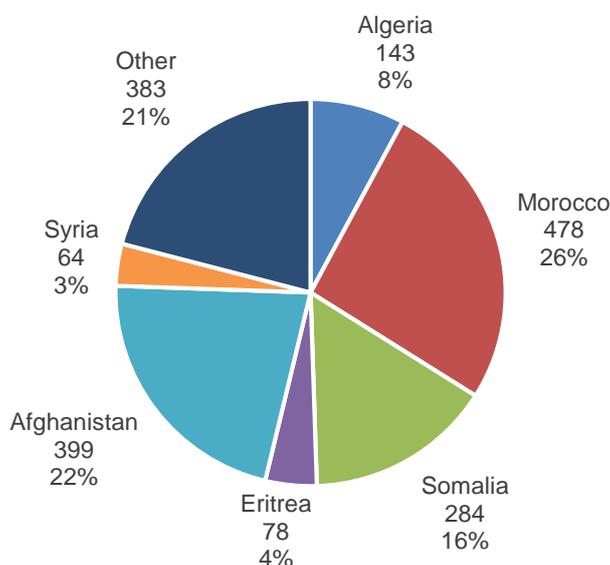


In total, 4 per cent of the boys assigned a municipality were registered as missing compared with 2.5 per cent of the girls assigned a municipality.

Among those registered as missing, unaccompanied minors with Moroccan and Afghan citizenship were the largest groups, followed by Somalia, Algeria, Eritrea and Syria.

¹³ Through to the end of 31 May 2016.

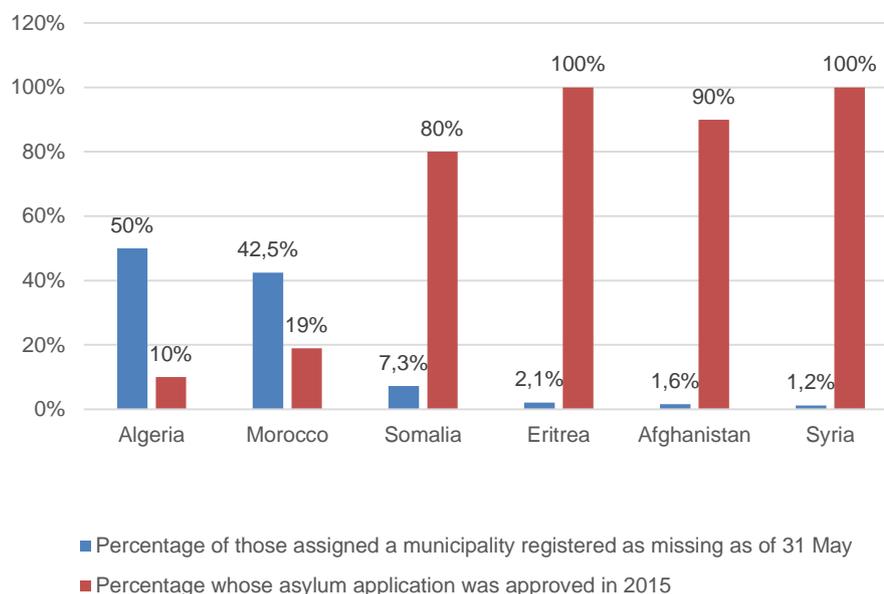
Figure 2 Citizenship group, percentage of those registered as missing at 31 May 2016.
Source: Swedish Migration Agency



Among the unaccompanied minors who have a greater chance of obtaining a residence permit (such as Syrians and Afghans), disappearances are less common than among unaccompanied minors who have little chance of obtaining a residence permit (such as Moroccans and Algerians). In the figure below, there is a clear connection between the percentage of those missing and percentage of those receiving an approved asylum application.¹⁴ In other words, the figure indicates a negative correlation between the likelihood of receiving a positive decision on an asylum claim and the percentage that goes missing for a certain nationality.

¹⁴ The figure shows percentage of approvals for 2015. The percentage that receives a residence permit from a certain citizenship group may have varied over the years.

Figure 3 Percentage of missing unaccompanied minors and percentage of unaccompanied minors whose asylum application is approved¹⁵ in the citizenship groups with the largest number of disappearances. Source: Swedish Migration Agency



The figure shows that minors with Algerian and Moroccan citizenship often go missing; half of the Algerian minors and more than 40 per cent of the Moroccan minors assigned to a municipality in 2013-2016 were registered as missing in May 2016. Of the asylum cases decided in 2015, only 10 per cent of Algerian unaccompanied minors, and 19 per cent of Moroccan minors had successful asylum applications.¹⁶

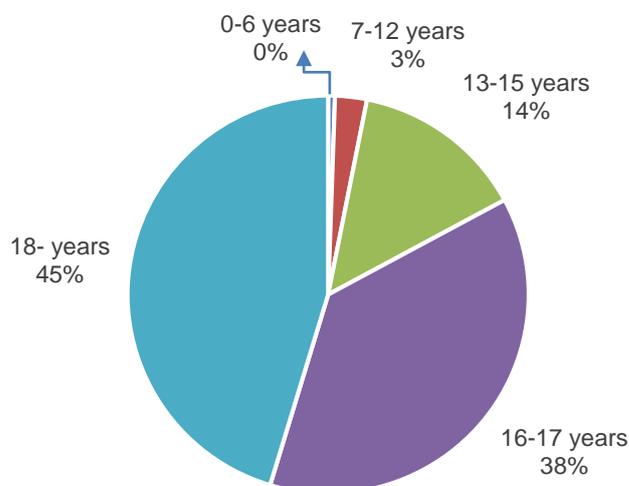
However, among unaccompanied minors from Somalia, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Syria, disappearances are relatively uncommon and for these citizenship groups, the proportion of asylum application approvals is high. Since the vast majority of unaccompanied minors are Afghans, they are nonetheless the second largest group among minors that go missing (see Figure 2), even if only a small percentage of all Afghan unaccompanied children go missing. It should also be noted that the percentage of approvals for Afghan unaccompanied minors is currently lower than the level of 2015, which is the year shown in the figure.

The figure below shows the age of minors registered as missing at the end of May 2016. The largest group is over 18, which is because the age was adjusted upwards afterwards by the Swedish Migration Agency. In total, 83 per cent were over 16 when they went missing and 3 per cent were under 12.

¹⁵ The percentage that receives an approval is less if we include Dublin cases (in other words application that are taken over and reviewed by another country) and other cases (that include those that go missing or withdraw their application).

¹⁶ The percentage of approvals is exclusive of Dublin cases and others.

Figure 4 Age at disappearance among those registered missing at 31 May 2016.
Source: Swedish Migration Agency



The fact that children under 12 go missing is remarkable. At the same time, there is limited information about what is behind these disappearances. According to the Swedish Migration Agency, the children may have travelled on with other friends or relatives. It is also possible that the absolutely youngest unaccompanied minors themselves are children of older unaccompanied minors.

Reasons for disappearances after municipality assignment

In terms of reasons that form the basis for disappearances, the knowledge of the municipalities appears to be greater for minors assigned municipalities than unaccompanied minors who are in the arrival phase. This may be attributable to the minors assigned a municipality often having been in the municipality for a longer time and having more contacts with e.g. social works.

Rejection of an asylum application and a perceived risk of having an asylum application rejected and fear of being deported are, according to several municipalities, known reasons that unaccompanied minors go missing after being assigned a municipality.

In the questionnaire, the municipalities have also emphasized that there are also cases where minors travelled to other countries to seek asylum as they were afraid of their asylum application in Sweden being rejected or had already been rejected.¹⁷ Among the municipalities that have said that these reasons are commonly occurring, there are several that point out that it is related to an upward adjustment of their age, meaning that the minors receive

¹⁷ The question asked in the questionnaire was worded as follows: "In the cases you have actual knowledge of the reasons, what do you know about the reasons why unaccompanied minors who have been assigned a municipality have gone missing?"

a rejection because their age is adjusted upwards or their 18th birthday is approaching and that they will no longer be defined as minors in a legal sense. This is also something emphasized by the municipalities interviewed.

That rejections and the fear of rejections are common reasons for unaccompanied minors to go missing is also confirmed by Swedish children's rights organisations. Several organisations say that children who have gone missing to avoid deportation when they either do not have anything to return to or because they fear for their lives as they have heard of other children who were killed when they returned from Europe.

Skånes Stadsmission, which is conducting the Unaccompanied minors project, tells about the children with rejection decisions that they encounter in their activities:

"They say that they would prefer to be in prison the rest of their lives in Sweden than return to Kabul. They are at risk of threats and being murdered. Most of them are Hazaras, a minority group with the odds stacked against them. They themselves do not come from Kabul, where they are sent. They say that they would do everything in their power to flee again if they were forced to go there."

The child wanting to go to a different municipality where he or she has friends/family and acquaintances, and psychosocial problems among the children have also been indicated by the municipalities responding to the questionnaires as common or very common reasons for disappearances. Other known reasons that several municipalities have stated are dissatisfaction with the placement and a desire to go to a different municipality.

Not getting along well and not being satisfied with the housing is also a known reason why children go missing. Some municipalities have said that they themselves perceive it to be difficult to meet the children's needs. For example, children's needs differ depending on their ages and at shelters with large age ranges, it may sometimes be difficult to make sure that everyone gets the help they need.

According to some 30 municipalities, it has also been known that children have gone missing because they have family, relatives and friends in other municipalities. Children have also been found back in their home countries with their parents. According to some 20 municipalities, criminality and drugs have also been known reasons why the child went missing.

Risk behaviours

Some kinds of behaviours or behaviour changes among unaccompanied minors may indicate if there is a risk that the child will go missing. According to half of the responding municipalities, low attendance in school is a common or very common risky behaviour. Another common risk behaviour is that the child is away from the shelter where he or she lives. The child

avoiding contact with staff at the shelter and suspected criminality are also risk behaviours that several municipalities have indicated as common or very common.

Children whose asylum application is rejected

As previously mentioned, asylum application rejection is a common reason why unaccompanied minors go missing. Many of the minors with rejections that have gone missing feel that the authorities have extensive gaps in their knowledge about the real situation of children. In several cases, the children believe that it is impossible for them to return to the country they are a citizen of and therefore choose to live in hiding in Sweden.¹⁸

The two single largest citizenship groups among the children who were registered as missing in May 2016 were Moroccans (26 per cent) and Afghans (22 per cent). While every individual case has its special problems, there are nonetheless certain conditions that apply to children with rejection decisions from the two different citizenship groups in general.

The Children's Rights Agency describes the Moroccan children's situation in Sweden in a report. At present, it is impossible for the Swedish Migration Agency to deport the people who have a deportation decision when their identity cannot be established.¹⁹ This means that the Moroccan children in Sweden often fall between the cracks as they can neither receive a residence permit or be sent back to Morocco. This situation has led to many of the Moroccan children currently living on the streets in major cities like Stockholm and Gothenburg.

In 2015, more than 20,000 Afghan children applied for asylum in Sweden, most of who were teenage boys. This was a large increase from earlier years, which according to the Swedish Migration Agency is due to a worsening economic and security situation in Afghanistan.²⁰ According to a report from Save the Children, the level of violence has increased in Afghanistan in recent years, and the conflict especially impacts children.²¹

Many of the Afghan children who come to Sweden belong to the Hazaras minority group, who in contrast to the majority in Afghanistan are Shia Muslims, and have historically had to endure discrimination and persecution. According to the Swedish Migration Agency, around half of the unaccompanied Afghan minors in Sweden have also been residents of Iran.²² According to the children whose accounts we have studied, those who have received asylum application rejections have been deported to Kabul, a city

¹⁸ The children's accounts come from Stockholms Stadsmission (the BABA project), Skånes Stadsmission (the Unaccompanied minors project) and the Children's Rights Agency.

¹⁹ Children's Rights Agency (2016). The undesired – a report about the unaccompanied Moroccan minors.

²⁰ Swedish Migration Agency, 21 January 2016, Why so many unaccompanied Afghan minors have sought asylum in Sweden, <http://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Nyhetsarkiv/Nyhetsarkiv-2016/2016-01-21-Darfor-har-sa-manga-ensamkommande-afghanska-barn-sokt-asyl-i-Sverige.html>.

²¹ Save the Children (2016). Afghan Children Cannot Wait – The case for investing in their future now.

²² Swedish Migration Agency, 21 January 2016, Why so many unaccompanied Afghan minors have sought asylum in Sweden, <http://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Nyhetsarkiv/Nyhetsarkiv-2016/2016-01-21-Darfor-har-sa-manga-ensamkommande-afghanska-barn-sokt-asyl-i-Sverige.html>.

where most have never been and where they perceive it as difficult or impossible to establish life.

“The Swedish Migration Agency believes that everything is easy, that everything is set up in Kabul, that there are no problems to return there. But you have no place, you don’t know anybody there, you have nowhere to live and no money. The Swedish Migration Agency might compare Sweden and Afghanistan; they think that it’s as if you would move from Malmö to Jönköping, that there are no problems. Maybe they think that it’s the same thing in Afghanistan, but it’s not. There is a very large difference between different cities in Afghanistan.

Another reason, if you have problems with anyone, it’s not easy to live in a new city. Maybe you can live a few months up to a year; after that, the problems and the reason you fled come back. People talk with each other.

There is a lot of focus on the Hazaras and Shia Muslims. They don’t want the Hazaras to study at university or gain power... It’s the regular people who are affected now: kidnappings, bombings, they are the ones affected now in Kabul.”

- Boy, (Skånes Stadsmission, Unaccompanied Minors project)

All of this in various ways constitutes obstacles for the children who get a return decision to return to Afghanistan. Accounts about children who have returned to Kabul from Europe and been subjected to violence or been killed deter children who have received a rejection in Sweden. In addition to this, there are accounts about children who have returned to Afghanistan from Sweden and could not take out the re-establishment support that is supposed to be paid out by the Swedish Migration Agency. Accordingly, many unaccompanied minors, especially Moroccan and Afghan children, with rejection decisions are in a situation where they either cannot return, or for various reasons do not see it as a possibility to return to the country they are citizens of, which leads to a large group living in hiding in Sweden today, and a risk that more children choose to go underground in the future.

In the interviews, it came forth that there is currently a great unease in many municipalities that the rising number of rejections will have major consequences. Several municipalities also report that they have many children who have already received rejections and are awaiting deportation – a situation that is mentally exhausting for the children. More mental illness demands more resources, but in conjunction with the changed compensation rules, some municipalities are now worried that the quality of reception may suffer. Several municipalities also emphasized a greater need for proactive efforts and clear dialogues with the children about them possibly only being in the country temporarily. An example of such work is the model Strömsund

developed, according to which a continuous dialogue is held with the child about what is happening in the asylum process. The dialogue also includes the legal guardian and possible contact person at the residential shelter and in some cases the Swedish Migration Agency to create good conditions for collaboration during the course of the asylum process. In the scope of the Strömsund model, focus is also placed on finding solutions together with children who received a rejection that can make the return process easier, such as first aid training, computer training, course certificates from school if a finishing certificate is not possible, or other practical matters.

Procedures and approaches

The following sections present the mapping's results regarding the municipalities' procedures and approaches both in terms of work to prevent unaccompanied minors from going missing and in terms of acting when a child has gone missing. This section also touches on what happens when an unaccompanied minor receives an asylum application rejection, and issues concerning collaboration between different actors.

Prevention work

Prevention work is of major importance in the work with unaccompanied minors. It aims to prevent asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors from going missing, as well as to prepare children for potential rejection to their asylum application.

Several municipalities lack established written action plans, guidelines or procedures specially prepared to *prevent* unaccompanied minors from going missing. Only 21 per cent of the responding municipalities in the questionnaire said that they have guidelines for prevention work. However, prevention work can be included in the broader fundamental work with regard to creating security and is therefore not established in steering documents. Among those that lack guidelines with a preventive purpose, a common reason (60 per cent) was that they had few or no disappearances.

The account below comes from a boy who, after having provided incorrect information in the asylum process, received a rejection to his asylum application and then went missing from the shelter where he was living. His story points out the importance of clear and early information to asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors.

"I am an unaccompanied minor and came from a refugee camp. I was born and raised there, but my parents come from a different country. They were forced to flee there before I was born. My family ran into the war there as well. My parents lost one of their sons in the war due to a shortage of food and water. I grew up in a refugee camp next to a military base. It was a very dangerous place to live; because of mines, every step you took could be your last. The war came to my town and it was impossible for us to go elsewhere in the country.

I had planned to go to the UK, but the smuggler tricked me that Sweden was the UK. He took my travel documents when we came to Arlanda. He also said that I shouldn't say that I was from the country to which my family had fled when I applied for asylum. He said that I had better chances to be able to stay if I said that I was born in my parents' country. I lived a good life at the asylum shelter. I got to go to school and had the

goal of becoming a good person in the future. I did not know what the asylum process looks like, but rather thought that one would get help when coming from a war-torn country.

I got my last rejection in 2014 [...] Now, I have nowhere to go.”

- Boy, Stockholms Stadsmission (the BABA project)

Obstacles and difficulties in the prevention work

According to the municipalities that responded to the questionnaire, overload and the large number of unaccompanied minors is the single largest obstacle in prevention work; nearly 40 per cent said that this is a somewhat large or very large obstacle/difficulty. Municipalities that felt overloaded pointed out that it led to the processing time being prolonged and impeded the control over the respective cases. The possibility of building relationships with the unaccompanied minors has also been made more difficult.

Just over one fifth of the responding municipalities said that the insufficient possibility of offering forms of housing that meet the children's needs is a somewhat large or very large obstacle to prevention work. As a result of overload, children have been placed in housing with many young people, which can make it difficult to see the needs of each individual. To be able to offer unaccompanied minors housing, extra staff had to be employed, and in some cases, staff with inadequate experience or expertise.

The questionnaire responses also indicate that a lack of knowledge among the municipalities can be an obstacle to prevention work. Just over half of the responding municipalities say that lack of knowledge of warning signs/risk behaviours among those who work with unaccompanied minors and lack of expertise among the staff in the municipality constitutes a certain obstacle to the prevention work.

The temporary asylum legislation that entered into effect in July 2016 can also conceivably have a bearing on the work of preventing unaccompanied minors from going missing. Among other things, the law means that temporary residence permits will be granted for all in need of protection except quota refugees.

The temporary law also limits the right to family reunification for unaccompanied minors in that residence permits are not granted on the grounds of family ties to somebody given a temporary residence permit. Both of these legislative changes, temporary residence permits and a limited right to family reunification, risk creating insecurity and uncertainty among the unaccompanied minors who spend time in Sweden, and can thereby conceivably lead to more children going missing. However, it is too early to talk with certainty about the consequences of the temporary law's consequences for unaccompanied minors.

When an unaccompanied minor goes missing

In the National Board of Health and Welfare guidance for the work of the social services with unaccompanied minors, there are guidelines for actions when children go missing. They state that while it is the legal guardian that according to the standards in place should file the police report, it is the shelter that is most often the first to discover that the child is missing. The National Board of Health and Welfare therefore recommends preparing local guidelines to ensure that all actors around the child are quickly made aware that a child has gone missing, and if the child has come back.²³

The questionnaire results reveal that it is more common that municipalities have set guidelines for how they should act if unaccompanied minors go missing than for prevention work. Procedures for acting in the event of disappearances are primarily in place at the social services and the municipalities' shelters. There is a noticeable difference between the municipality's own shelters and those that are procured, where 65 per cent say that the municipality's own shelters have guidelines, while only 23 per cent say that procured shelters have them.

Guidelines or protocols for responses to child disappearances are missing mainly at municipalities that have had few or no disappearances and therefore have not seen a need for them. Some municipalities have also said that there are no guidelines because the staff has adequate knowledge of how they should act.

When a child receives an asylum application rejection

What happens when an unaccompanied minor has received a final rejection of their asylum application depends on a number of different circumstances. In normal cases, the Swedish Migration Agency begins family investigations to establish if there are relatives, guardians or social authorities in the home country that can accept the child. If a reception can be arranged, and if the child has valid ID documentation and does not object to return, the Swedish Migration Agency arranges the return for the child.

If, however, an appropriate reception cannot be provided for the child, the starting point is that a resident permit on the grounds of practical enforcement obstacles is granted. If the child is close to his or her 18th birthday, according to the Swedish Migration Agency it may be that the decision will be for deportation with postponed enforcement.

The changes in the Reception of Asylum Seekers Act (LMA) that entered into effect on 1 June 2016 also have consequences for unaccompanied minors with rejection decisions. The new rules mean that the right to financial assistance under LMA ends for certain asylum seekers when the decision of rejection or deportation gains legal force, such as when an unaccompanied minor who has

²³ National Board of Health and Welfare, Work of the social services with unaccompanied minors – a guide (May 2013).

received a negative decision turns 18. As of the date the child turns 18, and is thereby considered to be an adult in a legal sense – and is then not considered to have any obstacles to enforcement – he or she does not have the right to lodging, daily allowance and other financial assistance under LMA. According to the Swedish Migration Agency’s forecast from October 2016, the new rules in LMA have affected 3,200 individuals who received a decision that they do not have a right to financial assistance, of who 500 have gone missing²⁴.

This legislative change has major consequences on unaccompanied minors with rejection decisions, as Abdi’s account below shows. According to volunteer organisations that come into contact with children who have received rejection decisions, there is also a considerable uncertainty among social services as to how they should handle these cases.

Abdi, aged 18, is from Afghanistan, but has lived most of his life in Iran. He has been in Sweden for more than four years. He received a rejection to his asylum application a year ago. Abdi contacted us one day before he turned 18 in a panic since the social services said that, as of his birthday, he could not continue living at the shelter he was living at and the Swedish Migration Agency gave notice that he will no longer receive money from them. He did not understand anything. Before his 18th birthday, he had a very good housing situation, he did well at school and he had a contact person who was important to him, a whole support system and suddenly overnight everything disappeared. On his birthday, when we met the social services together with Abdi to get an urgent review, the administrators were clear that they had received explicit directives from their city district to not grant financial assistance. When he asked where he should go tonight, they referred him to the church. Now, Abdi lives around with different friends and tries to get by. Although Abdi neither has a secure housing situation nor knows anything about his future, he is holding on in school and his training is important for him. We have appealed the decision and are awaiting a ruling.

- Children’s Rights Agency

There is information that those who have recently turned 18 are treated differently in different municipalities, and even by different city districts in the same municipality. This applies more specifically to how the social services handle applications for emergency assistance from young people who, after a rejection decision has gained legal force, and have turned 18 no

²⁴ Swedish Migration Agency, Operating and cost forecast October 2016, <http://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.2d998ffc151ac38715917594/1477389437052/Migrationsverkets+prognos+oktober+2016.pdf>.

longer have the right to assistance under LMA. In several cases, the social services have not chosen to accept the children's applications, with the motivation that "you will get a rejection anyway", and in other cases, the application has been rejected with the motivation that the support would not be permanent (in cases where the applicant previously received support), and in yet other cases, the social services referred to the Swedish Migration Agency for support.²⁵ According to SALAR, however, everyone who is in a municipality, even those with a rejection decision, has a right to apply for assistance and have their application reviewed.²⁶

²⁵ Children's Rights Agency and Skånes Stadsmission (the Unaccompanied Minors project)

²⁶ SALAR, 30 May 2016, New rules on the right of asylum seekers to assistance as of 1 June 2016, <https://skl.se/integrationsocialomsorg/asylochflyktingmottagandeintegration/flyktingsituationen/nyaregleromasylsokandesratttillbistandfran1juni2016.9272.html>.

Identified development areas

This mapping shall form the basis of the continued work on the national government assignment to the County Administrative Boards concerning unaccompanied minors who go missing. The County Administrative Boards shall in collaboration with other authorities and actors, based on what comes forth in the mapping, propose measures to the government to keep unaccompanied minors from going missing. Results and methods shall be disseminated to authorities, municipalities, county councils and other concerned actors. This section presents the development areas identified by the mapping.

Statistics and collecting information

One of the mapping's most striking findings is the lack of compiled and uniform statistics on missing unaccompanied minors. With what the statistics look like today, it is difficult to obtain an overall picture of which children go missing, when they do so and what it looks like in different parts of the country. Common definitions for when a child is considered to have gone missing are also lacking. Comparable and uniform statistics is a prerequisite for the prevention work at the local, regional and national levels and for being able to make special efforts both in the phases of the asylum process where the risk of disappearances is elevated and for the children who are at a greater risk of disappearing. Consequently, it is a problem that the supply of information and statistics is so deficient.

Information about children outside the asylum process

While statistics about unaccompanied minors who go missing during the asylum process are deficient, information about children outside the asylum process is almost non-existent. The information that exists about children who do not seek asylum or live in hiding after a rejection mainly comes from volunteer organisations that meet these children in their activities. **The information that exists is often inaccurate or unreliable and is also not compiled, which impedes the mapping of, and work with, this group.**

Statistics on children who go missing in the arrival phase

Information on unaccompanied minors who go missing in the arrival phase is not compiled, neither at the regional nor the national level. At present, it is up to the municipalities to keep statistics on children who go missing before being assigned a municipality, and whether or not this is done varies widely between municipalities, which also apply different definitions of "missing". In connection with the high staff turnover, information about missing children is also at risk of being lost when staff is replaced. In smaller municipalities, it is common for individual social workers to have knowledge about children who have gone missing, but this information is not recorded and forwarded to new

staff. **At present, there is no actor that can compile the municipalities' statistics on unaccompanied minors who go missing before an enforced municipality assignment, and work to coordinate the municipality's work to register such information.** Compiled information is needed to provide regional and national actors an important basis for being able to drive the strategic work to prevent unaccompanied minors from going missing. The information being compiled centrally also requires a uniform interpretation of who is defined as "missing".

Statistics on children who go missing after municipality assignment

Having reliable and uniform information about children who go missing is a prerequisite for the prevention efforts at a local, regional and national strategy level. The statistics that are available today on unaccompanied minors who go missing are deficient. The Swedish Migration Agency compiles statistics over unaccompanied minors with a municipality assignment who have gone missing, but these statistics are deficient, especially in terms of showing which municipalities the children went missing from. **The absence of a connection to which municipality the children generally went missing from means that it becomes difficult to get a picture of disappearances at the county and municipal level, which impedes preventive work.**

Effects of amended legislation and practices

Effects of temporary asylum legislation

The temporary asylum legislation that entered into effect in July 2016 is at risk of creating greater insecurity for unaccompanied minors, and thereby also an increased risk of disappearances. Among other things, the law means that temporary residence permits will be granted for all in need of protection except quota refugees.

In its requested comment to the government, the Ombudsman for Children said that temporary residence permits, which entail a risk of being deported to a perilous situation, create insecurity that “for a child constitutes an obstacle to the child’s rehabilitation, readjustment and integration into society”.²⁷

The temporary law also limits the right to family reunification for unaccompanied minors in that residence permits are not granted on the grounds of family ties to somebody given a temporary residence permit. The limited possibility of family reunification can also conceivably increase the risk that unaccompanied minors go missing as it creates an insecure and untenable situation for the children. However, it is too early to talk about the actual

²⁷ Ombudsman for Children, “Draft on the legislation submitted for consideration Limitations of the possibility to receive a residence permit in Sweden”, ref. no. 3.9:0095/16.

consequences of the changes in the asylum legislation, but the risks are clear. This makes prevention efforts even more important.

Effects of the change to the Reception of Asylum Seekers Act (LMA)

The change in the Reception of Asylum Seekers Act (LMA) that entered into effect on 1 June 2016 has consequences for unaccompanied minors with rejection decisions. The right to financial assistance under LMA now automatically ends on the 18th birthday if there is a decision of rejection or deportation that has gained legal force and the time limit for voluntary return has run out. Our mapping shows that there is considerable uncertainty among social services as to how they should handle these cases. According to SALAR, everyone who is in a municipality, even those whose rejection decision has gained legal force, has a right to apply for assistance and have their application reviewed. However, in some municipalities it has happened that the social services have refused to accept an assistance application, or that municipalities have referred to it being the responsibility of the Swedish Migration Agency to offer housing. We have received reports of several cases where children went missing prior to their 18th birthday due to a fear of no longer being able to make a living when the assistance ends.

Clear information and harmonised treatment of unaccompanied minors with rejection decisions who are approaching their 18th birthday can contribute to preventing the disappearances, which is why it is important to provide the children clear and reliable information in the matter. To ensure an equal and harmonised treatment, the municipalities can, while awaiting precedent-setting legal cases, comply with SALAR's guidelines in the matter.²⁸ Even if this is only a short-term solution, it is important to ensure an equal treatment.

Temporary residence permits for unaccompanied minors with obstacles to enforcement

Unaccompanied minors who have had their asylum application rejected, and where the decision has gained legal force, shall insofar as possible be returned to the country they are a citizen of. The return of children under the age of 18 can, however, only be carried out when there is appropriate reception in the home country; otherwise, practical obstacles to enforcement are considered to exist.

In practice, this means that unaccompanied minors aged 16 to 17 may stay in Sweden solely on the basis of obstacles to enforcement and with the knowledge that they in all likelihood will not be able to stay after their 18th birthday. The Ombudsman for Children has expressed concern about a

²⁸ SALAR, 30 May 2016, New rules on the right of asylum seekers to assistance as of 1 June 2016, <https://skl.se/integrationsocialomsorg/asylochflyktingmottagandeintegration/flyktingsituationen/nyaregleromasylsokandesrattillbistandfran1juni2016.9272.html>.

situation where more children will be able to stay only on the grounds of obstacles to enforcement, and believes that the situation these children will be in can cause anxiety and uncertainty among the children.

The children affected by this are mainly Afghan children who have no relatives in Afghanistan (often because they have lived all or most of their lives in Iran or Pakistan), or the Moroccan children who have no ID documents. The issuance of temporary residence permits, or deportation decisions with postponed enforcement, to these children risks leading to a greater risk of disappearances.

A situation with a growing group of children and young people in hiding who may not stay, but still cannot return is at risk of becoming untenable on the long term. **To keep children from ending up in such a “limbo”, it is important to work to streamline the return process and to make it possible for those who cannot return to obtain permanent residence permits.**

Stronger support for unaccompanied minors throughout the asylum process

Unaccompanied minors in the arrival phase

As there is an elevated risk of disappearances during the arrival phase, it is **important that municipality assignment occurs as quickly and safety as possible, and to have a preparedness to handle situations similar to what happened in autumn 2015.** Several municipalities believe that there is a clear connection between whether or not a child goes missing and if they received clear information about the asylum process. It is therefore also important that the child be able to meet a legal guardian in the arrival municipality in case the assignment takes longer than expected, and that they may meet their legal representatives as soon as possible after arrival, before the first meeting with the Swedish Migration Agency. This can both lead to more well-founded decisions and fewer misunderstandings about the children. This should lead to fewer disappearances, and prevent disappearances by the children getting information about the asylum process early on.

Unaccompanied minors with rejection decisions

At it is common that disappearances among unaccompanied minors are linked to the fear of rejection decisions or actual rejection decisions, it is **important to provide unaccompanied minors with clear, readily available information about the asylum process, and to provide unaccompanied minors who received a rejection decision that will be enforced support in preparing for the return process.** It is important that the information is adapted for children, and is based on the children’s special needs and that it is readily available during the entire asylum process. An example of how this can be done is Strömsund Municipality, which has prepared materials and

method support for how municipalities in collaboration with other actors, such as the school, can work with children regarding rejections and the return process. The Red Cross has also developed methods and recommendations on how support can be provided to asylum seekers who are rejected and deported against their will.²⁹

By holding a continuous dialogue with unaccompanied minors on the asylum process and various different future possibilities, one can prevent children from going missing out of a fear of rejection.

Mental illness and psychosocial problems

Several municipalities report that psychosocial problems among unaccompanied minors can be a reason that children go missing. Around 40 per cent of the municipalities that responded to the questionnaire say this is a common or very common alleged reasons why children go missing. In addition to this, several municipalities point out that the rising number of rejections has led to, and is expected to continue to lead to greater mental illness among unaccompanied minors. There are also reports that the unaccompanied minors who get to Sweden are in worse condition now than when they came last year, which may be due to the journey being more arduous for several reasons. Therefore, **stronger and early efforts are needed to address the rising mental illness and psychosocial problems among unaccompanied minors**, to prevent these children from going missing.

Collaboration

Collaboration for preventative work

The mapping shows that there is often a lack of guidelines in the municipalities for what the work of keeping unaccompanied minors from going missing may look like. Only one fifth of the municipalities that answered the questionnaire said that they have set procedures. In addition, a majority of the municipalities that lack procedures for prevention efforts say that they have not seen a need to prepare such procedures as they have had no or few disappearances. This is problematic as prevention should not be seen as a reaction to something that has happened, but aim to prevent something that there is a risk of happening. According to the municipalities, “overload”, the large number of children who have come, is the biggest obstacle to the prevention work. This confirms the view that preventive work is often de-prioritised when the reception system is under pressure.

At the same time that most municipalities have no procedures for prevention efforts, there are several municipalities in Sweden that have developed their

²⁹ Red Cross (2015). Asylum application rejection – Returning.

own method materials or found successful ways to work preventively in project form. Many municipalities could benefit from greater regional and national coordination and collaboration in these issues. **Method materials and models for prevention work with unaccompanied minors that work well in one municipality can be shared and distributed to other municipalities.** Here, both the county administrative boards and SALAR can play an important role in the coordination and distribution of good examples.

Collaboration when an unaccompanied minor goes missing

Most municipalities have some form of set guidelines for acting when an unaccompanied minor goes missing. However, they can differ widely between the municipality's own asylum shelters and procured treatment homes. The municipalities often cannot confirm that the procured shelters have equivalent procedures as those under municipal direction. To ensure an equal treatment, it is important that all asylum shelters, the municipality's own and those established or run under procurement, have clear procedures for how staff should act when unaccompanied minors go missing. Written guidelines being in place is especially important as staff turnover is often high. In some counties, there are already common regional guidelines to support the municipalities, but national coordination is also important. The National Board of Health and Welfare guide for the work of social services with unaccompanied minors can serve as a starting point in the **continued work of finding common approaches nationally and to coordinate various actors' roles when an unaccompanied minor goes missing.**

In addition, the mapping shows that the municipalities consider the greatest obstacle to the collaboration when unaccompanied minors go missing is difficulty investigating what has happened to the missing child. Information on why the child went missing is often insufficient. Something that can also impede collaboration on children who have gone missing and then found is that the case at the social services is often written off, or closed, as early as two to four weeks after the child has gone missing. This can lead to the person encountering the child, often police or on-call social workers, must devote time and resources to investigating which municipality the child went missing from, which in turn can also lead to a greater risk that the child goes missing again. Here, the work with the operational pilot where the police in Stockholm County monitored cases of missing unaccompanied minors can be used to identify development areas in collaboration with concerned actors.



The County Administrative Board works to ensure the Stockholm region is an attractive place in which to live, study, work and develop companies.