

HOMELESS ROMA IN SWEDEN: DISCRIMINATION AND DENIAL OF HOUSING

A national housing crisis and a pervasive misunderstanding that state obligations vis-à-vis human rights are limited to citizens, underpinned by anti-Roma rhetoric in Swedish public debate, pose a huge challenge to ensuring the right to housing for destitute EU citizens in Sweden. Amnesty International identifies an urgent need for a broader, and human rights compliant, approach to housing and homelessness in Sweden.



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DISCRIMINATION OF ROMA HOMELESS MOBILE EU CITIZENS IN SWEDEN

Following the enlargement of the European Union in 2007 and especially since the 2008 economic crisis, many EU citizens have migrated to other countries in the Union. Among them, an estimate of between 4,000 and 5,000 Romanians and Bulgarians have ended up in destitution and homelessness in Sweden. The presence of destitute EU citizens, most of whom are Roma, has stirred strong reactions in Sweden despite the relatively small number of individuals. Many of these destitute EU citizens support themselves by begging, can-collecting for recycling or taking occasional jobs, and most are living in situations of homelessness. In Sweden, where exposed poverty in the form of street homelessness is widely perceived as an anomaly that is inherently “un-Swedish,” many EU migrants have been met with suspicion, fear, and outright racism. Anti-Roma sentiments and anti-begging rhetoric permeates the Swedish debate. In August 2018, teenagers in the small Swedish city Huskvarna assaulted a Romanian man sleeping rough and supporting himself by begging; the assault resulted in his death. In Skåne, in the south, service-providing partners of Amnesty International report that hate crimes against Roma EU citizens are common, but rarely lead to criminal charges. Municipal bodies and national agencies have been slow or unwilling to assume responsibility for meeting the EU migrants’ basic human rights. Their main argument is that it is not Sweden’s obligation to guarantee the human rights of citizens of another EU country. To support this argument, politicians, spokespersons for municipalities and government authorities, and the media have consistently referred to principles of EU law, according to which EU citizens taking advantage of their freedom of movement in the Union can expect very little support from the host state. Equally consistently, they have ignored universal human rights principles set forth in instruments to which

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Sweden is party—principles that establish far greater responsibilities of the host state vis-à-vis all human beings in the territory.

In 2018, Amnesty International published a report on Sweden’s treatment of so-called “vulnerable EU citizens,”¹ without a right of residence, and their access to basic rights (to housing, water, sanitation, health, and to not be subjected to harassment or other discriminatory treatment by police) grounded in international human rights principles.² The report was based on interviews with 58 Romanian nationals, most of whom self-identified as Roma, in six different Swedish municipalities, and with representatives of national,

regional and local governments, police, and national agencies. The report concluded that the Swedish state fails to recognize and take responsibility for the rights of destitute EU migrants in Sweden and, as a result, that individuals live in a social and legal limbo for several years, without even a minimum level of protection or support.

Most of the people interviewed for the report said their main concern in Sweden was the lack of a secure, safe, and stable place to sleep, and that this was a source of enormous stress, fear, and anxiety. Access to housing and homeless shelter for vulnerable EU citizens in Sweden varies widely from one municipality to the other. In two small municipalities we visited, Gotland and Lund, long-term shelter was provided combined with social support, but in the major urban areas this was not the case. In the big cities, many interviewees slept in cars, under bridges, in tents made of plastic sheets or in shacks in the woods. Some spent occasional nights at a shelter but shelters for EU migrants in the biggest cities set limits for the number of nights that people could stay. Thus, after three or five nights the vulnerable EU citizens resorting to shelters were left to sleep rough again. One of the major cities, Malmö, did not have any shelter open to this group at all from the end of March to the end of December. Many spoke about the insecurity of having nowhere to go and the constant fear that the police would find them and force them to relocate.

HOUSING AS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT FOR ALL NOT RECOGNISED IN SWEDEN

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing has stressed the link between addressing homelessness and ensuring the right to life, not the least with regard to lack of protection from inclement weather. This rings true in a country like Sweden where

severe winters can make sleeping in the open directly threatening to life and limb. Because of the inherent connection between life, dignity, bodily integrity and adequate housing, several human rights bodies have emphasized the state's positive obligations to provide housing for all within its territory. We found, however, that Swedish officials on national and municipal levels showed a striking lack of awareness of the state's human rights obligations. The Swedish government has failed to acknowledge that the right to adequate housing applies to all, and that duty-bearers in all Swedish municipalities must take steps to fulfil their obligation to protect the lives and health of EU citizens living in destitution in Sweden.

The release of our Amnesty report in 2018 led to strong reactions in Sweden from politicians, media and the general public. The aspect that triggered most criticism was the report's claim that non-citizens have a right to housing, or at a minimum long-term shelter, while in Sweden. We assume this hostility at least in part is linked to the fact that there is a general housing crisis in Sweden, where many citizens themselves are struggling to find affordable housing and structural homelessness is on this rise.³ Amnesty International pointed to the human rights obligations of Sweden for all human beings within its territory. Nevertheless, members of the public, media, and representatives of political parties from right to left rejected the notion that homelessness is a violation of human rights that must be addressed by Swedish duty-bearers regardless of the legal status of the individual concerned. Amnesty International has, in dialogue with duty bearers on national and local level, found it difficult to challenge the idea (based on EU law) that Sweden's responsibility for destitute nationals of other EU member states is limited to emergency support and a ticket back to their home countries.

Since the publication of the report, the situation for homeless, destitute EU citizens in Sweden has worsened. The long-term

shelters for EU migrants in Lund and Gotland, highlighted as best practices in the report, have both closed due to lack of resources and municipal commitment. Housing arrangements for EU migrants in other municipalities are also at risk of closing. A national coordinator, who was assigned by the government to coordinate between state, regional and municipal bodies, and civil society actors in addressing the needs and challenges of vulnerable EU citizens, ended his assignment with a report in February 2020 in which homelessness was hardly addressed at all, let alone the right to housing.

COVID-19 AND HOMELESS ROMA IN SWEDEN

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation for homeless people in Sweden, citizens and non-citizens alike, has become even more desperate. According to service-providing organizations, while many Romanian and Bulgarian citizens quickly travelled to

their countries of origin, a large proportion of destitute EU migrants returned to Sweden within a couple of months, due to the desperate economic and social situation in their home countries because of the pandemic. Reports also suggest that the discrimination of Roma during the crisis has become even more critical. The returnees deemed that their chance to make a living was, although slim, still better in Sweden than in Romania and Bulgaria. Sweden has not yet introduced a full lockdown, but corona-related restrictions have made making money from begging and can-collecting for recycling even more difficult.

Amnesty International Sweden called for a moratorium on all evictions, and for a human rights-compliant emergency plan to protect all people living in homelessness against the pandemic, no matter their legal status or citizenship. Despite an initial positive response from state agencies to Amnesty International's call, very few concerted efforts have been taken to protect people experiencing homelessness

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from the pandemic. Homelessness schemes are a municipal matter in Sweden and, therefore, government and state agencies did little to address homelessness on a national level. In a meeting with Amnesty International in April, the Director-General of the National Board of Health and Welfare acknowledged that, in contact with social services, they had not raised questions about the situation of EU citizens living in homelessness, and thus that the Board had no information at all about how this particularly vulnerable group was affected by the pandemic.

Municipal efforts to address homelessness in the context of COVID-19 differ wildly in scope and ambition. Some municipalities, Amnesty International has learned, have organized new emergency housing and better outreach schemes, whereas others simply report that no steps had been taken at all. Service providers supporting people living in homelessness in Sweden tend to be civil society organizations and churches, albeit often with municipal funding. Many of these, due to social distancing restrictions and the fact that many of their volunteers are themselves in risk groups, have had to cut down their hours of service and number of beds available. Almost no municipality reported that they had taken extra steps to reach out specifically to and/or support vulnerable EU citizens living in homelessness.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of having a home to protect oneself and others from the virus. Having closely monitored the situation of EU migrants living in homelessness in Sweden for the past two years, there appear to be two main challenges to ensuring that the right to adequate housing for all is

upheld: Sweden's serious housing crisis, marked by an increase in general homelessness, and the pervasive misunderstanding that state obligations vis-à-vis human rights are limited to citizens only. There is an urgent need for a broader, and human rights compliant, approach to housing and homelessness in Sweden.

Service-providing partner organizations tell us that in this regard, human rights organisations can play a key role. By insisting that housing is a human right, and one upon which the enjoyment of many other rights depends, including the right to health, we can influence the narrative about and approach to the issue of homelessness as such. It is equally important for human rights organisations to emphasise that it is incumbent upon states to uphold the human rights of all and ensure that no one, including migrants, is left behind. The right to housing for Roma EU migrants in Sweden must be addressed within broader efforts to guarantee a systemic, human rights compliant, and inclusive solution to the growing housing crisis in Sweden.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A term used in Swedish legal and policy documents to refer to citizens of other EU countries who live in destitution in Sweden.
- 2 Sweden has human rights obligations toward all people in the country, including non-citizens; a principle stemming from binding human right instruments and authoritative interpretations from UN and European human rights bodies. Indeed, both the [UN Human Rights Committee](#) and the [UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) have criticized Sweden for not including EU migrants living in destitution in the rights protection awarded to Swedish nationals.
- 3 Structural homelessness refers to lack of housing for economic reasons, not necessarily linked to other social problems such as mental health issues, substance abuse, etc.