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Switzerland struggles with an influx of unaccompanied minors

Between 2016 and 2018, more than 3,000 unaccompanied minors requested asylum in Switzerland. In addition to this number, hundreds of young men arrived alone from the Maghreb region, with most coming to Geneva. The authorities are accused of failing to respond to the situation.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

There are two types of minors who arrive alone in Switzerland. Those who are eligible for asylum because of their country of origin count as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs). They are given a roof over their heads, meals, education and social benefits. In 2015, 2,700 UMAs requested asylum, the majority of them boys aged 16–17, from Eritrea.

The others are unaccompanied minors (UMs) coming from countries which do not make them eligible for asylum, for example, Morocco. These people do not receive social assistance and have no platform on which to build their life. “UMAs have usually grown up with their family,” explains Sylvia Serafin, co-manager of Païdos, an association which offers psychological and educational support plus a daily meal to unaccompanied minors. “However, UMs are adolescents who have fled the breakdown of their family at a very young age. They have had to live through dramatic experiences during their exile and most of them suffer from post-traumatic stress. They need appropriate support.” Most of these young people come from Algeria or Morocco and present psychological deficiencies. They may also suffer the consequences of their vagrant situation, experiencing dental problems, injuries or skin conditions. Some of them have passed through more than 15 European cities in just

three years, according to the French organisation Trajectoires.

Suicide of a young person in a refugee centre

Most of the UMs in Switzerland can be found in Geneva. There are two reasons for this: the city’s proximity to France and the fact that French is spoken there. This new phenomenon exacerbates another situation involving the UMAs. Since 2018, their treatment has come under criticism from social workers and organisations. The issue was thrust into the spotlight by the suicide in March of a young Afghan at Le Foyer de l’Etoile, a refugee centre managed by the Hospice général. “This young man’s suicide was feared but not totally unexpected following four years of exhaustion and instability,” said staff at the centre in a letter to parliament. The refuge, which holds up to 200 minors seeking asylum, has been compared to a prison. Subject to overcrowding, noise, temperature fluctuations, and lacking in educational facilities, these centres are not fit for purpose. “It’s not really a centre,” a young asylum seeker told Geneva School of Social Work, “it’s a refugee camp.”

The organisations, including the Human Rights League, claim the government is not doing enough to recognise and uphold the rights of these minors as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Collectif Lutte des MNA (a group lobbying for the rights of unaccompanied minors), founded in 2018, highlights the lack of any procedures or benefits for these young people. Julie, 25, a social sciences student in Lausanne, was involved in launching the group: “Unaccompanied minors are found on the street and placed in bed and breakfast accommodation with people who are not equipped to care for them and who send them away if there is a problem,” she explains. They are allowed a sandwich in the evening and breakfast in the morning. They are not given any education and the case workers responsible for them are completely overwhelmed by the sheer volume of cases.”

No education for unaccompanied minors

According to the Department of Education, minors stay in designated centres; bed and breakfast accommodation is an emergency measure. At the beginning of October, it confirmed that no unaccompanied minors were in education. The Collectif has also questioned the “pointless” retention of minors in custody when they are stopped by the police and found to have no ID. If the only issue is their illegal presence in the country, the juvenile court generally decides not to pursue such cases and simply lets the people go, according



to a source within the legal sector. Sophie Bobillier, a lawyer, argues that a minor cannot be prosecuted for being in Switzerland illegally. "The right to protection for the child takes precedence," she says. The Collectif was received this summer by a delegation of the Geneva cantonal government, where it demanded that the authorities provide minors with a document recognised by the police. The canton acknowledged that the frequent prosecution of minors under guardianship for breaking the law regulating foreign nationals was undesirable.

Minors sleeping in the street

The influx of unaccompanied minors on the streets of Geneva dates from spring 2018. In March, minors spend-

ing the winter in a Salvation Army nuclear shelter found themselves out on the street. Some were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, while others slept rough or left the area, according to Païdos. Now the influx has started again, with around 20 more young people being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation according to the Collectif and Païdos. The Child Protection Services have disclosed that they monitored 200 files on young people under guardianship between summer 2018 and 2019.

In June, the cantonal parliament sustained a motion in favour of accommodating these young people. The left and conservative parties supported it, while the SVP voted against it fearing the setting of an unwanted precedent. Anne Emery-Torracinta,

We need help; respect our rights; listen to us – written messages from minors who arrived in Switzerland unaccompanied.
Photo: HETS Genève

cantonal councillor in charge of public education, denounced the accommodating stance displayed by the organisations towards the migrants. "They commit crimes. They are a group that a priori does not want to integrate and this poses a great deal of problems," argued the socialist.

The state opens a centre for unaccompanied minors

The cantonal authorities have responded to the lobbying by announcing the opening in October of a centre for unaccompanied minors with 25 places. It will accommodate children aged from 15 to 18, who will receive education adapted to their needs and medical care. Moreover, the authorities have launched an action plan to support unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, aimed at improving the level of care and access to education. Six unaccompanied minors also received an undertaking in October that they would receive educational support. This is a first. At the same time, the cantonal government argues that not all unaccompanied minors want to go to school and highlights doubts regarding their identity and age.

In Valais, where there are very few unaccompanied minors, the head of the population division wonders whether these minors could be French citizens. In the canton of Vaud, the issue does not even seem to exist. The International Social Service, based in Geneva, wants to dedicate one of its next conferences to this issue. The event will be held on 12 December and will be attended by guardians, social workers and doctors based in French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino.