
UN CRITICIZES, AND PRAISES, GERMANY'S CHILD REFUGEE POLICY

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The United Nations has delivered a mixed verdict on Germany's system for dealing with child refugees, according to a new report by the German chapter of UNICEF.

While the UN's children's rights program acknowledged that Germany had played a "leading role in coping with the so-called refugee crisis" and that its politicians, authorities and civil society had shown "great engagement and flexibility" in meeting the challenges of a refugee influx, many child refugees still lived in unhygienic and unsafe conditions.

Not only that, children in families are often in a more difficult position than unaccompanied minors, who are automatically put in Germany's child welfare system.

According the report's co-author Adam Naber - of the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Minor Refugees (BumF) - many refugee homes in Germany lack safe places for children. "Non-cash benefits, lack of private space, non-lockable sanitation facilities and the experience of violence and conflicts lead to dangerous moments and a hindrance of the development of refugee children and young people," Naber said, presenting the study in Berlin on Tuesday.

[Deutschland Flüchtlinge Kinder vor Flüchtlingsunterkunft (picture-alliance/dpa/B. Wüstneck)]

The study found that child refugees often have nowhere to play and learn

The mass "first reception" shelters, where people regularly live 10 or 12 to a room, often have poor hygiene, which, combined with crowded living and lack of locks on rooms often leaves children vulnerable to "increased stress and the risk of being a witness or victim of violence," the study said.

Cramped and dirty

"Compared to many other countries in the European Union, Germany has invested a lot in hosting the refugees in the last two years - that's certainly the first point I would make," Sebastian Sedlmayr, head of education for development at UNICEF Germany, told DW. "But it's important to flag that there are still some shortcomings."

Around 350,000 minors came to Germany in 2015 and 2016, putting a new strain on Germany's childcare infrastructure - especially kindergartens and schools. It also meant that many families were forced to stay in mass shelters for several months.

While German law stipulated that families with children should only spend a maximum of three

months in such a home (extended to six months in October 2015), some 22 percent of the families asked said that it took up to a year for them to be found a new home.

Sedlmayr also said that unaccompanied minors are often in a better position than accompanied ones - because they are automatically granted access to Germany's youth welfare system. "Children who have come with their families are explicitly excluded from that system and legislation," he said. "They have to rely on the capacity of their parents, and of course the capacity of their parents in a situation like that - not knowing the language and the rules of the country - is very limited."

For that reason, UNICEF wants Germany's youth services to pay more attention to those children. This is not a matter of lack of resources. "I wouldn't say it was a question of money, it's much more the attention," said Sedlmayr. "We need more attention on the children, and especially the children that are accompanied."

[Deutschland junge Flüchtlinge - Integration (picture-alliance/ZB/P. Pleul)]

Children should have access to schools regardless of asylum status, says UNICEF

"Many countries across Europe have relatively strong child and youth welfare systems in place," said Kirsten Di Martino, Germany country coordinator for refugee and migrant response. "None of the European countries could have been fully prepared for such a massive movement of people. But we now need to make sure that the child protection systems are not only there for the unaccompanied minors."

Life in waiting

Access to education was also flagged as a problem in the report. Many German states only grant school places to those whose asylum has been accepted, and most education is confined to German classes in the shelters themselves, not in a regular school. UNICEF said it was vital that children were given access to schools - irrespective of their asylum status or background.

Naber was at pains to point out that the study - entitled "Childhood in Waiting" because most of the children's lives are spent in the limbo of various bureaucratic systems - was a snapshot, rather than a thorough representative investigation, but it still offered a "broad and up until now barely available insight into the everyday world of children in refugee homes."

The work was based on a voluntary anonymous survey among helpers in refugee homes as well as a series of interviews with refugee families.

"Fleeing families want nothing more than to arrive and to start again. Given children in particular the best possible starting help in Germany is a good, if not one of the most important investments in our society," said Christian Schneider, director of UNICEF Germany.

Kaynak/Source: