

Missing children of Dutch asylum shelters

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In May 2024, Lost in Europe released the findings of their investigation into the disappearance of unaccompanied children in Europe. This investigation revealed that 51,433 children disappeared from refugee centres across Europe between 2021 and 2023, with Italy having the highest number of missing unaccompanied minors at 22,899 children (Van den Hof, 2024). Unfortunately, this is not the first time such a discovery has been done. In 2021, Lost in Europe found that 18,000 unaccompanied minors disappeared between 2018 and 2020 after they arrived in Europe. However, the data revealed by the 2024 investigation shows a significant increase in the number of disappearances.

Netherlands:

15,404 unaccompanied refugee minors registered in the Netherlands in the last three years (Dutch News, 2024). 850 of these children have disappeared from asylum shelters without any trace (Van den Hof, 2024).

According to Conny Rijken, a human trafficking rapporteur, some of the missing children might have been sold into forced labour, such as working in nail salons, or sex trafficking rings.

Unfortunately, these children seeking asylum in the Netherlands are not protected by the state. Authorities make no effort to find their parents or provide them with safe shelter and access to educational facilities. Until these children are treated according to Article 22 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, these children will continue to disappear.

Before 2024:

This is not the first time the Dutch authorities have found themselves in this situation. In 2023, 360 minors had disappeared from refugee shelters in the Netherlands between 2022 and 2023, all of whom vanished from the Ter Apel reporting centre. That year, 4449 minors without parents or guardians had applied for asylum in the Netherlands (Dutch News, 2023).

These children were first required to report to Ter Apel - before being relocated to a new asylum centre - where they all disappeared without a trace. Many of these missing children have ended up trafficked into forced labour or the illegal sex trade because, in 2008, Dutch police found 11 underage girls who had disappeared from Dutch asylum shelters, one of whom was working in the sex trade in Italy (Dutch News, 2008). The police also stated that 140 under-aged Nigerian girls had disappeared from Dutch asylum shelters between 2006-2008 (Dutch News, 2008).

Moreover, the locals of Ter Apel, who were surveyed by Lost in Europe for their 2023 report, noted that they had seen young “dark-skinned boys and girls” being picked up by “older Dutch and German men” from outside the refugee centre.

Government response:

The Human Rights Committee has asked the Dutch government to take urgent measures in investigating the trend of missing unaccompanied minors as well as addressing the root issues causing these disappearances. The Dutch government has also been asked to improve the quality of living standards and resources provided to children in the asylum shelters.

The Dutch government has announced that they are taking measures to solve this issue, however, nothing much has been done so far.

The current reported number of missing children is also not reliable because that can only be so if it is reported by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). However, their system is dysfunctional and prone to inside tensions leading to inefficiency.

The Dutch national rapporteur on human trafficking, Hermann Bolhaar, has criticised the Dutch refugee system and the government for their lack of implementing any protective and safeguarding measures, given the urgency of the situation and the danger unaccompanied children are finding themselves in.

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