

Do higher standards of detention promote well-being?

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Sweden is generally considered to have high standards of immigrant detention. However, a recent study conducted in Swedish detention centres suggests that irrespective of the high standards life in detention still poses a huge threat to the health and wellbeing of detained irregular migrants.¹

Sweden has a comparatively low detention capacity (235) and immigration detention occurs in specialised secure facilities rather than prisons. The maximum limit for detention is 12 months. Detention facilities are run by civil servants employed by the Swedish Migration Board. Detainees do not wear any uniform, can use mobile telephones and have access to the internet. Volunteers from different NGOs can visit to provide psychosocial support for detainees.

Initial results of the study indicate, however, that detainees still feel helpless, despite the comparatively better facilities. To date, the study has involved interviews with detainees, staff and nurses working at the detention centres and with volunteers visiting the detainees. Detainees expressed the futility of seeking help to meet their daily practical needs and resolve their legal cases, mainly because of the lack of or unhelpfulness of response from staff, lawyers and the police. They appreciated being able to go to the courtyard, use the gym, have food served four times a day and having access to the internet but were concerned about the restrictions imposed on the use of some of these facilities. According to the detainees, the services are still at the discretion of staff, who therefore play a major role in making the detention conditions bearable or unbearable. However, in the guidelines

issued by various international organisations such as IOM, UNHCR and the EU, training for staff in working with detainees often takes a back seat.

The health-care needs of the detainees are still not properly met. All except one detention centre has a nurse visiting just twice a week and no detention centre has mental health-care services available at the centre. Detainees sorely missed having someone to interact freely with, and their urge to talk and be listened to was evident during the interviews. Visits by NGO volunteers seemed to ease the stress for some but at the same time detainees were disappointed that the volunteers could not provide legal help. Physical features of the detention centres such as sleeping quarters situated close to noisy common areas and the high bare walls were cited as causes of stress.

Irrespective of the facilities provided, detainees considered detention centres to be similar to prison: “a prison with extra flavours”, they say. Uncertainty about the duration of detention and its outcome is a major contributing factor to their stress; some said that detention is worse than prison because in prison at least the outcome and the time period are known.

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