

Baseline report

Sweden has settled quite a number of refugees since the 1980s. From the year 2000 and forward, Sweden has given international protection to around 20,000 to 30,000 refugees every year. 2013 and onward, as the conflict in Syria continued and persons from other neighboring countries fled towards Europe, the number of asylum applications in Sweden increased dramatically. In 2015, a total of around 163,000 persons applied for asylum in Sweden, whereof around 51,000 came from Syria. This has affected the situation dramatically, and many now question the ability to integrate those who arrive. As a result, in November 2015, the government announced a change in the asylum and family migration regulations, and a new three year temporary law came into force into in 2016. After the new law, the number of asylum application dropped to 29,000 in 2016, and continues to remain at approximately the same level up until today. The greatest change in the temporary law is the type of residency permit that asylum seekers are granted. Before the law change, the large majority of asylum seekers received permanent residency upon recognition. With the new law, resettled refugees are the only category who receives a permanent residency upon arrival. Those who are recognized as refugees according to the 1951 convention receives a residency permit of 3 years, and those who are given status of subsidiary protection are given a 13 month residency permit. The third category of protection, humanitarian protection, was abandoned altogether. Another major change is the limited possibilities to family reunification. Before the law change, family reunification was possible for all beneficiaries of international protection without any requirements. Now family reunification is only possible for those who have a refugee status if the application is made within three months after recognition. Otherwise, economic and housing requirements need to be met for beneficiaries of international protections to be reunited with the family.

Even though the entry to Sweden has become more difficult, no changes in rules regarding access to introduction program, financial support, healthcare, social security and citizenship are made so far. All newly arrived persons granted protection, whether temporary or permanent, have access to a targeted 24-months introduction program which includes language courses, social orientation and job-related training activities and an individual introduction benefit. The well-established introduction program has been in place since the 1990s, coordinated and implemented by the municipalities. However, since December 2010 it is the state, through the Employment Service, that is responsible for the program.

The focus of the Swedish integration policies for newly arrived is on employment, through heavy investments in the newcomers human capital. In addition to targeted support, the strategy is mainstreaming. Integration policies should thus cover all areas of social development and be incorporated as part of all policy areas.

The municipalities' role is crucial since they provide practical assistance such as housing, education and schooling for children and adults, income support and other social work and services. Municipalities are also responsible for organizing Swedish language tuition (SFI) and civic orientation to newly arrived refugees. Municipalities receive a single payment compensation per refugee and per year from the state, which should cover the costs for SFI, civic orientation, interpreters and special introductory activities within schools and preschools. The large number of residence permits for persons with international protection in recent years has impacted Sweden and will continue to affect the integration efforts in the near future. Housing shortage is one of the biggest issues in Sweden. Since March 2016, all municipalities have a responsibility by law to accept a designated number of persons granted international protection depending on the housing, job availability and employment prospects (prop. 2015/16:54). Economic and social integration are also a challenge. There is a lack of capacity in introduction program, with the growing number of newly arrived enrolling into Swedish language courses and employment related training and education.

A new type of challenge for integration is the temporary residency permits of 13 months, separating families and bringing insecurity whether they can continue to stay in Sweden or not. Moreover, the political climate has changed towards advocating for more restrictive immigration policies, and how this will impact the still generous and comprehensive integration policies are interesting to follow-up in the coming years.