

Shantytown Sweden

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Citizens of Sweden—a welfare-state society—probably never thought that they would see the day when shantytowns dotted their major cities. Recent years have seen an enormous influx of beggars from other European countries; in the past year alone, the number of vagrants from Romania and Bulgaria has doubled, to 4,000. Their arrival is a consequence of the European Union’s principle of the free movement of persons—a well-meaning policy but one that, at least in this case, has produced the sight of scores of beggars sitting outside supermarkets, drugstores, and upscale boutiques, hoping that someone will leave a coin in their 7-Eleven coffee mugs. They beg in the most affluent districts, where the social contrast between the person kneeling in the street and the passersby toting Luis Vuitton bags becomes almost perverse. In the evenings, the indigent—some with terrible physical disabilities—retreat to the shantytowns or to some other form of shelter. Some may be victims of human trafficking, as suggested by the “rent” they pay criminal compatriots for their begging spaces.

Sweden has had beggars before but in much smaller numbers. An entirely new phenomenon is the presence of street children from North Africa. Some 200 such children, the youngest being just nine, now reside in Stockholm. They have arrived in the last two years, “unaccompanied,” in the official term. Like the adult beggars, they have no future or security in Sweden. According to police, North African street children are both the victims and the perpetrators of most juvenile crime in Stockholm’s inner city. It is obvious that the new immigrants live in squalor and danger, and that they are generally regarded as unwelcome. Many Swedes feel that their sense of home is deteriorating because of the rise in crime, vandalism, and homelessness, and the loss of public space: parks, libraries, and other public institutions are increasingly used as places of shelter.

The tragedy is that this state of affairs has been tolerated and in fact encouraged by most politicians and opinion makers across the political spectrum. As one libertarian author put it, “it is often better to live in a shantytown on the outskirts of Stockholm than on the outskirts of Mogadishu.” That may be true in the narrowest sense, given the horrors of places like Somalia, but it shouldn’t serve as the guiding principle for allowing beggars to continue sleeping in the streets or in Johannesburg-style shantytowns. The Left, which traditionally has championed the welfare state and the abolition of poverty, now defends the “right” to beg in the streets. Degradation is reinterpreted as empowerment and getting a leg up in a prosperous society.

Sharing this worldview, Swedish political elites are reluctant to vacate the shantytowns and discourage begging. Instead, they pledge additional public resources that will serve only to enable the begging behavior and ensure that the problem continues to grow, to the real detriment of the social fabric. Even Sweden’s largest center-right party recently announced that it supported criminalizing “organizers” of begging but keeping the act itself legal. Sweden shows every sign of

repeating the destructive story of many American cities a generation ago, as Myron Magnet chronicled in his 1993 book, *The Dream and the Nightmare*: in which elites churn out the dreams, but society pays the cost.

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