

COUNTRY BRIEFING
SEPTEMBER 2021

Switzerland



INTRODUCTION

The Statelessness Index (<https://index.statelessness.eu/>) is an online comparative tool that assesses European countries' law, policy and practice on the protection of stateless people and the prevention and reduction of statelessness against international norms and good practice. The Index was developed and is maintained by the [European Network on Statelessness \(ENS\)](#),¹ a civil society alliance of over 170 organisations and individuals in 41 countries working to end statelessness and ensure that stateless people in Europe access their rights.

ENS worked with individual members and [humanrights.ch](#)² to research and compile comparative information on statelessness in [Switzerland](#).³ This briefing summarises the findings on how Swiss law, policy and practice performs against international norms and good practice on the protection of stateless persons and the prevention and reduction of statelessness. It covers five thematic areas – International and Regional Instruments, Stateless Population Data, Statelessness Determination and Status, Detention, and Prevention and Reduction – and makes a series of recommendations to the Swiss Government for reform in priority areas.

To be stateless is not to be considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law. It is a legal anomaly that prevents more than 10 million people around the world - and more than half a million in Europe - from accessing fundamental civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights.

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL INSTRUMENTS

Different international and regional treaties provide for the protection of stateless persons and the prevention and reduction of statelessness. Switzerland is Party to the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and to most relevant human rights instruments. However, Switzerland has still not ratified the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and is Party to neither the 1997 European Convention on Nationality nor the 2006 Council of Europe Convention on the Avoidance of Statelessness in Relation to State Succession. Moreover, the Swiss Government's reservations to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child could have implications for stateless persons, as they relate to family reunification rights for certain non-nationals (Article 10), the separation of children from adults in situations of deprivation of liberty (Article 37) and children's rights in the criminal justice system (Article 40).⁴

The Swiss Government should consider acceding to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, the European Convention on Nationality, and the Convention on the Avoidance of Statelessness in relation to State Succession.

The Swiss Government should consider withdrawing its reservations to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.



STATELESS POPULATION DATA

States should collect reliable quantitative and qualitative data on statelessness and adopt and strengthen measures to count stateless persons on their territory.⁵ The availability of reliable data is linked to whether procedures to identify and determine statelessness exist.

The Swiss Government publishes two different datasets on the stateless population in Switzerland, one by the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) and the other by the Federal Statistical Office. The Government uses the categories 'stateless', 'without nationality' and 'state unknown' in the datasets. The definitions of these categories are not publicly available and potentially overlap. The SEM reported 673 people formally recognised as stateless in Switzerland in December 2020.⁶ The number of people recognised as stateless in Switzerland remains very low with just 59 people being newly recognised in 2020.

Statistical information on immigration detention and removals are not publicly available. There have been no official surveys or mapping studies of statelessness by the authorities to date, but UNHCR Switzerland published a comprehensive mapping study in November 2018.⁷

The Swiss Government should take concrete steps to improve the recording of statelessness, including by harmonising and defining the statistical categories used by the different government agencies and at different administrative levels (Federal and Cantonal). It should ensure that registration officials are trained to accurately identify and record statelessness. It should consider carrying out a comprehensive exercise to accurately map the stateless population in Switzerland.

The Swiss Government should publish disaggregated data on stateless people and those at risk of statelessness in immigration detention and in removal procedures.



STATELESSNESS DETERMINATION AND STATUS

To be able to provide the protection and rights enshrined in the 1954 Convention, including a residence permit and the right to work, study and facilitated naturalisation, State parties need to be able to identify stateless people on their territory. UNHCR recommends that this is best fulfilled through a dedicated statelessness determination procedure (SDP).⁸

Switzerland has a procedure to determine statelessness. However, the procedure is not formalised in law but simply governed by general administrative practice. Swiss authorities apply a restrictive definition of a stateless person, which is not in line with international standards. The SDP has strict requirements, which are difficult to meet without the assistance of a lawyer and interpreter. For example, an application under the procedure must be submitted in writing, be reasoned, and include reliable evidence. In practice, the burden of proof is primarily on the applicant (who must provide documents to demonstrate that they are stateless), and the authorities apply an inconsistent standard of proof. There is little available information on how to regularise your status as a stateless person. While there is no fee for the procedure, free legal aid is in principle not granted at first instance. The strict requirements for statelessness determination result in very few people being recognised as stateless in Switzerland.

There is no automatic legal admission or residence status granted during the procedure. If a person is recognised as stateless, they are granted a residence permit with access to healthcare, social security, and employment, as well as, upon application, a travel document. After 10 years of legal residence a permanent residence permit may be granted at the discretion of the authorities. There is no facilitated route to naturalisation for adults recognised as stateless in Switzerland.

The Swiss Government should establish in law a dedicated, formalised statelessness determination procedure in line with UNHCR Guidelines and good practice. It should apply the definition of a stateless person enshrined in Article 1 of the 1954 Convention to ensure that all stateless persons are effectively recognised and granted protection. Additionally, it should ensure that all stateless people have access to a facilitated route to naturalisation in line with Article 32 of the 1954 Convention.



DETENTION

Stateless people face a heightened risk of arbitrary detention particularly where procedural safeguards to identify and determine statelessness and related barriers to removal are lacking.⁹ Protections

against the arbitrary detention of stateless people are limited in Switzerland. Statelessness is not considered a juridically relevant fact in decisions to detain, a country of removal does not need to be identified prior to detention, and detention can be ordered while the authorities are establishing a person's identity.

Some procedural safeguards are in place, such as: a maximum time limit for detention, judicial oversight within 96 hours of the detention order, access to free legal aid, and access to remedies to challenge the detention. The law provides for alternatives to detention, but these are not systematically considered. A referral to the statelessness determination procedure is possible if the person lodges a claim of statelessness, but there is no formal referral mechanism.

The Swiss Government should take further steps to protect stateless persons from arbitrary detention by introducing a formalised statelessness determination procedure, embedding consideration of statelessness as a juridically relevant fact in all decisions to detain and ensuring clear referral routes from detention and returns proceedings to the statelessness determination procedure.



PREVENTION AND REDUCTION

International law enshrines the obligation to prevent and reduce statelessness. Positively, Swiss law contains safeguards to prevent statelessness in the case of foundlings, adopted children and children born to Swiss nationals abroad. However, there is no safeguard in law for children born in Switzerland who would otherwise be stateless. The only route to Swiss nationality for children born stateless in the country is a naturalisation procedure based on five years' legal residence and other integration criteria, which is only accessible for children up to the age of 18. This leaves some children born in Switzerland stateless for at least five years.

Every child's right to legal identity and nationality is not only essential to the prevention and reduction of statelessness but is a core principle of international law.¹⁰ Birth registration must be free and take place immediately after birth without delay. Although Swiss law stipulates that all children must be registered immediately, some face barriers to birth registration in practice due to their parents' lack of documents or irregular residence status resulting in fear of detention and deportation. Civil registry officials are prohibited from reporting unregistered people to the migration authorities when registering births. Late registration is possible in law and practice and there are no fees or other barriers.

Deprivation of Swiss nationality is permitted on national security grounds, but not where this would render a person stateless. However, there is a concerning increase in the use of deprivation of nationality against so-called 'foreign fighters' with dual nationality. Whilst it is only applied to dual nationals and does not directly render the person stateless as a result, the use of deprivation of nationality in the context of national security is highly problematic. In one case, a person deprived of her Swiss nationality in 2019 remained in Syria with her three minor daughters who retain their Swiss nationality, against their best interests. The Swiss Government has so far not undertaken any efforts to return the children to Switzerland, despite the father being in Switzerland. . Deprivation procedures lack a proportionality assessment and do not pay sufficient attention to the obligation to prevent statelessness and the principle of the best interests of the child.

The Swiss Government should consider amending the law to ensure that all children born on its territory who would otherwise be stateless acquire a nationality at birth and ensure that the status of parents does not prevent immediate birth registration.

The Swiss Government should refrain from the use of deprivation of nationality, particularly where a risk of statelessness could arise, and ensure that the best interests of the child are always paramount in any decision that affects them.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The Swiss Government should:

- Accede to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.
- Accede to the 1997 European Convention on Nationality.
- Accede to the 2006 Convention on the Avoidance of Statelessness in Relation to State Succession.
- Withdraw its reservations to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Take concrete steps to improve the recording of statelessness, including by harmonising and defining the statistical categories used by the different government agencies and at different administrative levels (Federal and Cantonal).
- Ensure that registration officials are trained to accurately identify and record statelessness.
- Consider carrying out a comprehensive exercise to accurately map the stateless population in Switzerland.
- Publish data on stateless people and those at risk of statelessness in immigration detention and in removal procedures.
- Establish in law a dedicated, formalised statelessness determination procedure in line with UNHCR Guidelines and good practice.
- Apply the definition of a stateless person enshrined in Article 1 of the 1954 Convention in order to ensure that all stateless persons are effectively recognised and granted protection.
- Ensure that all stateless people should have access to facilitated naturalisation.
- Take further steps to protect stateless persons from arbitrary detention by introducing a formalised statelessness determination procedure, embedding consideration of statelessness as a juridically relevant fact in all decisions to detain and ensuring clear referral routes from detention and returns proceedings to the statelessness determination procedure.
- Consider amending the law to ensure that all children born on its territory who would otherwise be stateless acquire a nationality at birth and ensure that the status of parents does not prevent immediate birth registration.
- Ensure that the status of parents does not prevent immediate birth registration.
- Refrain from the use of deprivation of nationality for the purpose of national security and ensure that the best interests of the child are always paramount in any decision that affects them.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://www.statelessness.eu>

² Humanrights.ch is a Swiss non-profit organization with the main aim of gathering and providing information, raising public awareness, monitoring state action and counselling on human rights issues and the human rights situation in Switzerland. Lead Country Researcher for the Statelessness Index in Switzerland are Jyothi Kanics, ENS Advisory Committee Member, and Barbara von Rütte, humanrights.ch.

³ <https://index.statelessness.eu/country/switzerland>

⁴ https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en

⁵ Conclusions of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States on Statelessness, 4 December 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/12/04/council-adopts-conclusions-on-statelessness/>

⁶ SEM (2021) Bestand ausländische Wohnbevölkerung Dezember 2020, <https://www.sem.admin.ch/dam/sem/de/data/publiservice/statistik/auslaenderstatistik/2020/12/2-10-Best-Tot-Kat-d-2020-12.xlsx.download.xlsx/2-10-Best-Tot-Kat-d-2020-12.xlsx>

⁷ UNHCR (2018) Statelessness in Switzerland https://www.unhcr.org/dach/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2018/11/CH_UNHCR-Statelessness_in_Switzerland-GER-screen.pdf

⁸ UNHCR (2014), Handbook on Protection of Stateless Persons, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/statelessness/53b698ab9/handbook-protection-stateless-persons.html>

⁹ ENS (2017) Protecting Stateless Persons from Arbitrary Detention: An Agenda for Change, https://www.statelessness.eu/sites/www.statelessness.eu/files/attachments/resources/ENS_LockeInLimbo_Detention_Agenda_online.pdf

¹⁰ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 7.

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