



A child is a child

Protecting children on the move from violence, abuse and exploitation

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May 2017

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Please contact:
Division of Data, Research and Policy, UNICEF
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Editorial, data and analysis

Core report team: *Jan Beise, Anna Grojec, Claus Bech Hansen, Jens Matthes, Sarah Rosengaertner, Danzhen You*

Managing editor and writing: *Anna Grojec*

Narrative development, research and writing: *Claus Bech Hansen, Sarah Rosengaertner*

Data analysis, research and writing: *Jan Beise, Danzhen You*

Guidance and coordination: *Jens Matthes*

Additional research, writing and production support: *Laura Healy*

Further support for data analysis and research: *Lucia Hug*

Stories and child interviews: *Christopher Tidey, Ashley Gilbertson, Priyanka Pruthi, Ngosa Kaloto Lesa*

Design and production

Design and content strategy: *Olga Oleszczuk, Shangning Wang*

Data visualizations: *Olga Oleszczuk, Jan Beise, Shangning Wang, Danzhen You*

Fact-checking: *Yasmine Hage, Xinyi Ge*

Copy-editing and proofreading: *Erin Tettensor, Anna Mukerjee*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Millions of children are on the move across international borders – fleeing violence and conflict, disaster or poverty, in pursuit of a better life. Hundreds of thousands move on their own. When they encounter few opportunities to move legally, children resort to dangerous routes and engage smugglers to help them cross borders. Serious gaps in the laws, policies and services meant to protect children on the move further leave them bereft of protection and care. Deprived, unprotected, and often alone, children on the move can become easy prey for traffickers and others who abuse and exploit them.

Alarming numbers of children are moving alone

Many children move alone and face particularly grave risks. In parts of the world, the number of children moving on their own has skyrocketed. On the dangerous Central Mediterranean Sea passage from North Africa to Europe, 92 per cent of children who arrived in Italy in 2016 and the first two months of 2017 were unaccompanied, up from 75 per cent in 2015. At least 300,000 unaccompanied and separated children moving across borders were registered in 80 countries in 2015–2016 – a near fivefold increase from 66,000 in 2010–2011. The total number of unaccompanied and separated children on the move worldwide is likely much higher.

Specific reasons motivate children to undertake journeys alone. Many seek to reunite with family members already abroad. Others pursue their families' aspirations for this generation to have a better life. Perceptions of the potential benefits of children moving, especially to certain destinations, filter through social networks. Other factors include family breakdown, domestic violence, child marriage and forced conscription.

Without safe and legal pathways, children's journeys are rife with risk and exploitation

Whatever their motivation, children often find few opportunities to move legally. Family reunification, humanitarian visas, refugee resettlement spots, and work or study visas are out of reach for most. But barriers to legal migration do not stop people from moving, they only push them underground.

Wherever families and children desperate to move encounter barriers, smuggling in human beings thrives. Smugglers range from people helping others in need for a fee to organized criminal networks that deliver children into hazardous and exploitative situations.

Once children and families place their fates in the hands of smugglers, the transaction can readily take a turn towards abuse or exploitation – especially when children and families incur debts to pay smugglers' fees. Europol estimates that 20 per cent of suspected smugglers on their radar have ties to human trafficking – they help children cross borders, only to sell them into exploitation, sometimes akin to contemporary forms of slavery.

Some routes are particularly rife with risks. In a recent International Organization for Migration survey, over three-quarters of 1,600 children aged 14–17 who arrived in Italy via the Central Mediterranean route reported experiences such as being held against their will or being forced to work without pay at some point during their journeys – indications that they may have been trafficked or otherwise exploited. Traffickers and other exploiters thrive especially where state institutions are weak, where organized crime abounds, and also where migrants become stuck and desperate.

As States struggle to manage migration, children fall through the cracks

As large numbers of refugees and migrants arrive, children among them are routinely left in conditions that would be deemed unacceptable for native-born children. They languish in overcrowded shelters, end up in makeshift camps or are left exposed to the dangers of life on the streets. Sometimes, compatriots force them to work under exploitative conditions in exchange for shelter and food. Mistrust of authorities and fear of detention and deportation keep children from coming forward to seek protection and support.

Harsh border enforcement policies leave children in limbo and exacerbate their risk of exploitation

Border closures and aggressive pushback measures can leave children and their families stranded in countries where they do not want to stay, are not welcome, or have few prospects. Unable to move on or go back, they are trapped in prolonged limbo that feeds anxiety, despair and self-harm, as documented among children in Greece and in Australian processing facilities in Nauru.

Some children avoid authorities for fear of detention, living on the streets under abysmal conditions and sometimes selling sex or resorting to petty crime as they save up to pay smugglers to facilitate their onward journeys.

Children on the move are children, first and foremost – they need protection

The Convention on the Rights of the Child protects every child, everywhere. All children, regardless of legal status, nationality or statelessness, have the right to be protected from harm, obtain such essential services as health care and education, be with their families, and have their best interests guide decisions that affect them.

Yet in practice, children on the move often suffer violations of their rights because of their migrant status. The way children on the move are treated varies widely from State to State, and the responsibility to care for them often falls too heavily on poorer countries. Even children fleeing violence and conflict often do not get the protection they need, particularly when refugee protection is curtailed in law or practice.

Sharing, not shifting, the responsibility to protect children on the move

The current system is failing refugee and migrant children. States have a responsibility to uphold their rights and protect all children within their borders, without exception.

When world leaders adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in September 2016, they acknowledged the urgent and unmet needs of vulnerable child migrants – especially unaccompanied and separated children – who do not qualify for international protection as refugees and who may need assistance.

It is now time to act.

Children's rights are not confined by national borders. Where conflict or disaster, neglect, abuse or marginalization drive children to move, their rights move with them. Leadership is urgently required to forge global agreement on how to protect and guarantee the rights of children as they move, no matter who or where they are.

AGENDA FOR ACTION

UNICEF is calling for a six-point plan to keep refugee and migrant children safe



PROTECT UPROOTED CHILDREN FROM EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE

Refugee and migrant children are extremely vulnerable to violence and abuse, and to being preyed upon by smugglers and even enslaved by traffickers. UNICEF calls for increasing safe and legal channels for children to migrate and to seek refuge. Cracking down on trafficking, strengthening child protection systems and expanding access to information and assistance can help keep children safe. Children and families should never be returned to face persecution or life-threatening danger in their countries of origin.



END THE DETENTION OF REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN BY CREATING PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVES

Detention is harmful to children's health and well-being – and can undermine their development. UNICEF calls for practical alternatives to detention for all children. Unaccompanied and separated children should be placed in foster care, supervised independent living, or other family- or community-based living arrangements. Children should not be detained in adult facilities.



KEEP FAMILIES TOGETHER AND GIVE CHILDREN LEGAL STATUS

Children who are travelling alone or who have been separated from their families are more easily preyed upon and more vulnerable to violence and abuse. UNICEF calls for stronger policies to prevent children from being separated from their parents and other family members in transit; and faster procedures to reunite children with their families, including in destination countries. All children need a legal identity and should be registered at birth.



HELP UPROOTED CHILDREN TO STAY IN SCHOOL AND STAY HEALTHY

Many refugee and migrant children miss out on an education – and many lack access to health care.



PRESS FOR ACTION ON THE CAUSES THAT UPROOT CHILDREN FROM THEIR HOMES

Protracted conflicts, persistent violence and extreme poverty and disadvantage drive



COMBAT XENOPHOBIA AND DISCRIMINATION

Uprooted children are often victimized by discrimination, xenophobia and stigma

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