

ALONE, ON THE MOVE AND UNSEEN

SPOTLIGHTING THE URGENT
NEEDS OF UNACCOMPANIED AND
SEPARATED CHILDREN

Data InSIGHT #3

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About the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move

The International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) is a cross-sectoral global coalition that aims to improve data and statistics and support evidence-based policymaking for migrant and displaced children. With the European Union as its main donor and jointly led by Eurostat, IOM, OECD, UNHCR and UNICEF (Secretariat Chair), IDAC brings together governments (including experts from national statistical offices and migration- and displacement-related ministries), international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, academics, civil society and youth.

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NAVIGATING THE WORLD ON THEIR OWN

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The Syrian civil war left 15-year-old Nawar and his family little choice but to leave their home behind and begin anew in Egypt. As they adjusted to life as refugees, another hardship soon emerged: Nawar's father required ongoing care for cancer, which was unavailable in their area of settlement. Nawar's parents were forced to leave him and his siblings, aged 14 and 18 years, behind for weeks at a time while their father received the medical attention he needed.

At 18, Nawar found himself once again on the move and alone. When complications emerged with his family's asylum application, he and his brother and sister attempted the dangerous route across the Aegean Sea. They were ultimately separated, forcing Nawar to cross several European borders alone, at times relying on traffickers.

“Being on the move and on my own was a long and excruciating experience. It shaped me in countless ways. It taught me resilience in the face of uncertainty, adaptability in unfamiliar environments, and the power of human connection even in the most difficult circumstances.”

– Nawar, forced from home at age 15

Key terms related to unaccompanied and separated children

Child

A child is every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.¹

Adolescent

Individuals from ages 10 to 19.²

Children on the move

Children who have been directly or indirectly affected by migration and displacement, either internationally across borders or within the same country. When referring to children on the move, IDAC includes child migrants; children in need of international protection, such as refugees and asylum-seekers; internally displaced children; children indirectly affected by migration and displacement, such as children who stay behind while parents or caregivers migrate; stateless children;³ and child victims of cross-border trafficking.⁴

Separated children

Children, as defined in article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.⁵

Unaccompanied children

Children, as defined in article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.⁶



Nawar's journey as an unaccompanied adolescent is telling in many ways. It reflects some of the extremely difficult choices that families are forced to make when crisis threatens their safety and security, and it illustrates the complex realities that can arise during migration and displacement. (To read more about Nawar and other first-person accounts of unaccompanied and separated children, see pp. 19–34.)

His story also underscores the critical roles that children often assume to support their families – roles that may leave them unaccompanied or separated from their parents or caregivers multiple times. Like many children who travel alone, Nawar's efforts to exercise his right to survive and thrive speak to his resilience, determination and agency.

A path of high stakes

Children like Nawar are found along every migration and displacement route, whether crossing international borders or travelling within their own country. Their reasons for leaving home are often tied to crisis – such as disasters and situations of conflict and violence – and violations of their rights, including persecution, limited opportunities for education and work, and the confines of poverty.

Children travelling unaccompanied or separated may be in vastly different stages of their journey – about to embark, in transit, at their destination or stranded along the way, held in detention, or forcibly or voluntarily returning to their places of origin. Much like Nawar, children may be separated from and reunited with adult family members

multiple times and at different stages of their journeys.

In 2025, it was estimated that more than 4,000 children were on the move without a parent or caregiver in Latin America and the Caribbean⁷ – a record high – and tens of thousands of unaccompanied children have been identified in Europe.⁸ Their stories continue to make headlines, often due to the traumatizing and life-threatening conditions that they endure as children navigating the world alone.

Many children who migrate or become displaced without the support of parents or caregivers find themselves facing situations far beyond their years. Due to their developmental stage, reliance on supportive relationships and urgent basic needs, they are highly vulnerable to situations of abuse, trafficking and exploitation. To access essential services such as health care, education, housing and protection, they must engage with complex social support systems on their own, while also adjusting to new legal, cultural and linguistic challenges.⁹ Many children on the move on their own are adolescents who take on responsibilities to help support their families: becoming heads of households, supporting younger children or sending money to family members elsewhere.¹⁰

Unaccompanied and separated children often encounter major obstacles in reuniting with their families due to procedural delays, legal hurdles, weak protective frameworks and difficulties in accessing assistance and support. Many get stuck in complex procedures for extended periods of time or are placed under state care, which often leads to a host of additional challenges.^{11, 12}

Overlooked, invisible and excluded

The concerning number of children who travel alone or become separated has raised alarm among humanitarian and child protection actors over the last decade, prompting agencies like IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF to call on the global community to take action. Though progress has been made to improve their protection and reunite them with their families, unaccompanied and separated children continue to face serious injustices and rights violations in countries around the world, oftentimes deprived access to the most basic essential services.

At the same time, reliable data and statistics about their circumstances are hard to come by. Many migrant and displaced children without a parent or caregiver are missing from the evidence base of people on the move entirely, in many cases travelling undetected within and between countries. The use of smuggling networks is common among them, which further complicates the monitoring and tracking of their existence, location, routes and well-being, not to mention efforts to reunite them with their families.¹³

While there are many challenges involved in collecting data on unaccompanied and separated children, the real-life implications of the gaps in the evidence base are too serious to ignore.

This brief by the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) aims to drive action from the global community to close these data gaps and stand up for the rights of these children. Like all IDAC products, it is the result of a joint effort by the IDAC Secretariat, which comprises Eurostat,

IOM, OECD, UNHCR and UNICEF. Its shared vision and advocacy framework for better data on unaccompanied and separated children draw from youth voices and lessons learned from countries themselves. These multi-stakeholder perspectives amount to a valuable compass to guide the global community in its efforts to protect and empower every child on the move.

This top-level analysis is based on a literature review conducted in 2025 of more than 200 journal articles and briefs from United Nations agencies, European Union institutions and non-governmental organizations. In light of the significant gaps in the data on the experiences of children travelling alone, it is not meant to be interpreted as comprehensive nor exhaustive. While there are many data gaps – both quantitative and qualitative – in the evidence base, it is clear that the rights of unaccompanied and separated children are regularly violated in countries around the world.





Stronger data, better protection

The rights of unaccompanied and separated children are protected under several international agreements, including a resolution adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Council that urges States to “ensure appropriate, integrated, and gender-sensitive child protection care and services for all unaccompanied and separated migrant children.”¹⁴

As highlighted in many legal protective frameworks (see pp. 57–61), accurate and timely data are crucial to upholding children’s rights, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized groups such as children travelling alone. Yet data remain scarce, due to the critical need to strengthen statistical systems in order to identify, monitor and track the well-being of unaccompanied and separated children. As the good practices in this brief demonstrate (see ‘Inside the data’ boxes), the data and evidence on these children can be improved when investments in resources and capacities are matched with political will.

While child-sensitive data are critical for shaping policy and programmatic responses, children who are on the move alone – many of whom are

adolescents – must also be recognized as complex individuals, not merely as victims or numbers on a page. Even in difficult circumstances, children consistently show resilience, agency and the ability to improve their situations.¹⁵

The future they deserve

Many unaccompanied and separated children are on the move to realize their dreams for a better life for themselves and their families through educational, economic or social opportunities, in addition to seeking international protection in the case of refugee and asylum-seeking children. Many recognize the importance of language learning and education and are motivated to successfully integrate in host communities.^{16, 17}

Positive interactions with society – with family members, educators and social workers, for instance – carry great importance in their experiences of integration into new environments.¹⁸ Access to education, stable support systems – such as care provided by relatives – and avenues for personal growth play a crucial role in helping children navigate challenges and build the future they dream of and deserve.^{19, 20}

Evidence-based policies and programmes for unaccompanied and separated children must not only be guided by their right for protection, but also by their capacity for self-determination. In order for every child to truly thrive, their capabilities and strengths must be recognized, nourished and celebrated.





UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN:

5 facts

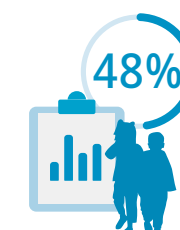


1. The number of unaccompanied and separated children on the move around the globe is unknown.

There is no comprehensive global figure for unaccompanied and separated children who migrate internationally, are displaced or seek international protection. Though efforts have been made to predict and estimate family separation over the last decades to meet the urgent needs of this child population,²¹ current national and global estimates likely fall far short of capturing the true scale of children's movement.

Due to vast gaps in global tracking, data from 2024 on child refugees and asylum-seekers who are on their own were limited to 86 of 181 countries where UNHCR reports statistics,²² capturing just a portion of the total population of unaccompanied and separated children. Regional data coverage is highly uneven, with Europe, Africa and North America contributing the majority of reported figures (see fact 2). Asia and Latin America – regions with significant populations of children on the move – are concerning underrepresented in official statistics.

Addressing these data deficiencies is critical to fortifying the protective environment for these highly vulnerable children and to guiding an effective response that supports and empowers them.



Only **48%** of countries where UNHCR reports statistics have data on refugee and asylum-seeking children travelling alone



Call for data

Accurate and standardized data on unaccompanied and separated children and family reunification is needed in every national statistical system.



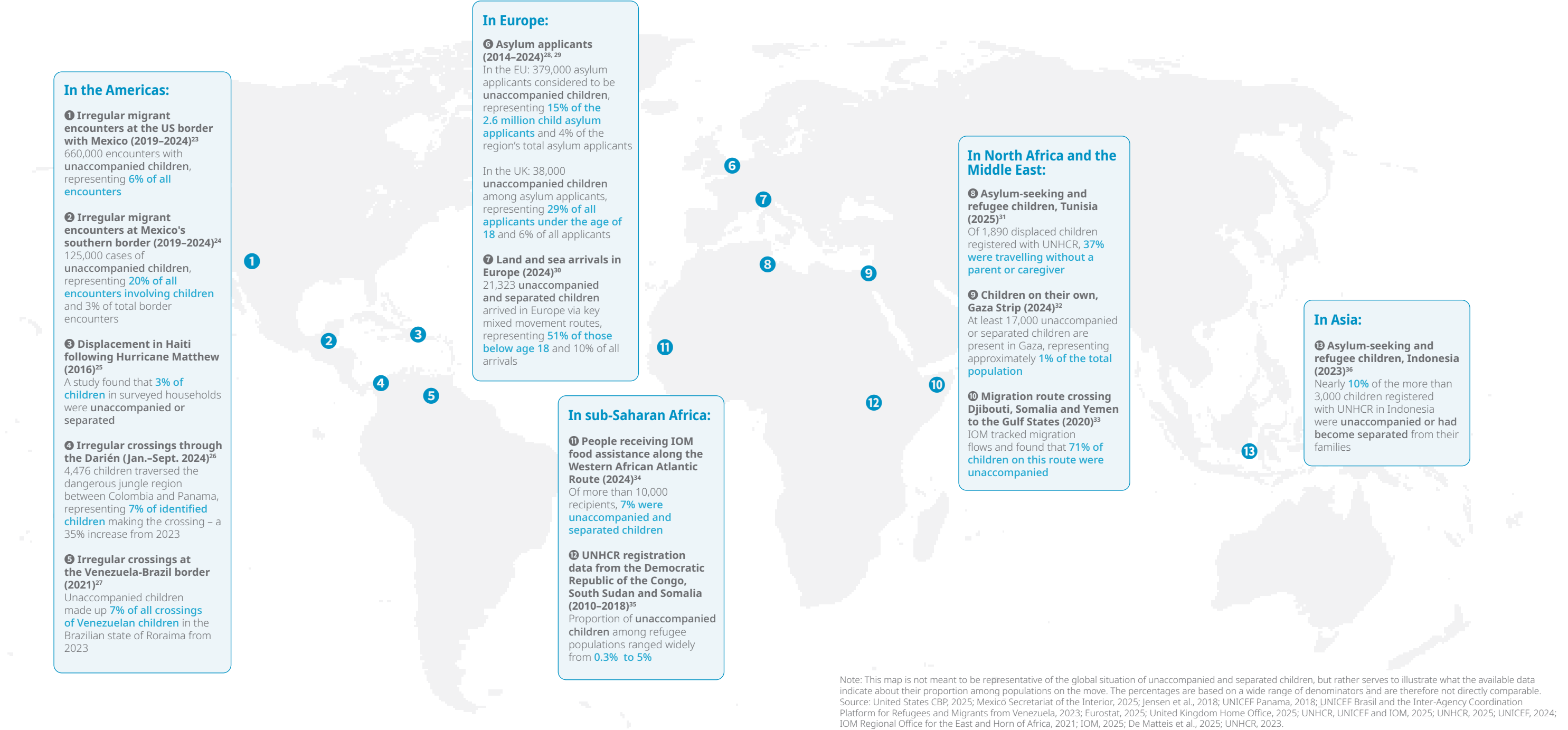
2. As route-specific data show, children travelling without a parent or caregiver make up a concerning proportion of all children on the move. Children travelling unaccompanied or becoming separated during the journey are also regularly documented among migrant and displaced populations.

Data from key mixed movement flows indicate that a troubling number of children are on the move without a parent or caregiver, in some cases representing a significant share of migrant and displaced children. Regional data and statistics on displaced populations – such as asylum applicants – also consistently indicate the presence of unaccompanied and separated children.

Available data, however, likely represent only a small part of the global population of unaccompanied and separated children. For instance, route-based analysis is unavailable for many of the world's busiest corridors, such as movements from Venezuela or Syria. It is likely that many children are making these journeys alone and are missing from the current evidence base.

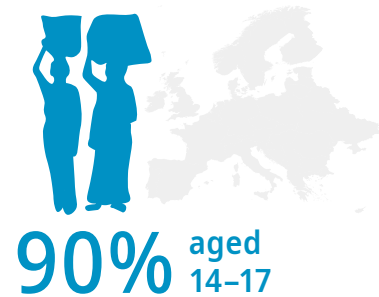


Call for data
Harmonized data collection and standardized methodologies and indicators across countries and along mixed movement routes is critical for tracking children's movements and protection needs across borders.

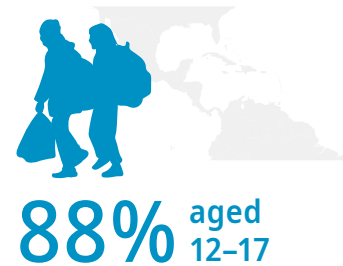


3. Existing data indicate that adolescents consistently make up the majority of children on the move alone. Quality data on key dimensions like age and sex, however, remain sparse.

In countries and regions where data are available, adolescents represent the largest proportion by age of the unaccompanied and separated child population. But emerging evidence points to a recent increase in the share of younger children travelling unaccompanied.³⁷



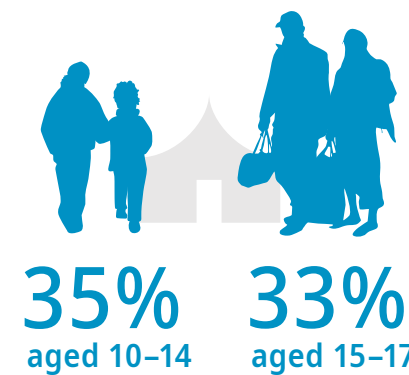
of the 380,000 asylum applicants in the EU classified as unaccompanied children from 2014 to mid-2025 were between the ages of 14 and 17³⁸



of children on the move alone along Mexico's southern border in 2024 were between 12 and 17 years old⁴⁰



of unaccompanied and separated children captured in 2024 arrivals data from five southern European countries were aged 15–17 years³⁹



of unaccompanied and separated children supported by UNICEF in humanitarian settings in 2024 were aged 10–14 and 15–17 years, respectively⁴¹



Call for data

Strategic investment in disaggregated data is critical for understanding the varied experiences of children on the move and developing evidence-based responses. This includes analysing how different drivers of movement influence population demographics and contribute to family separation.



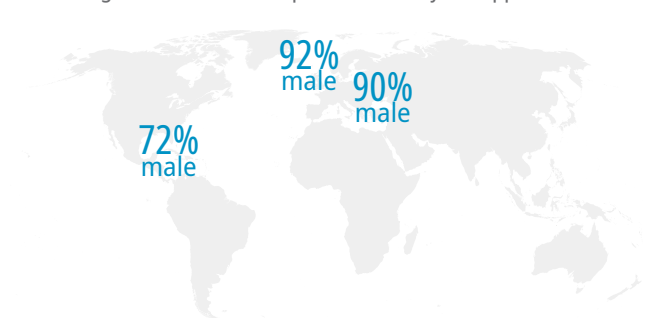
4. Gendered differences in the numbers, experiences, motivations and vulnerabilities of children travelling alone are evident throughout the migration process.

A child's gender significantly shapes mobility trends, patterns and outcomes. Available evidence suggests that boys are more likely to be on the move alone than girls, travel farther from home and cross international borders, while girls who travel alone often move within their own country or region.⁴²

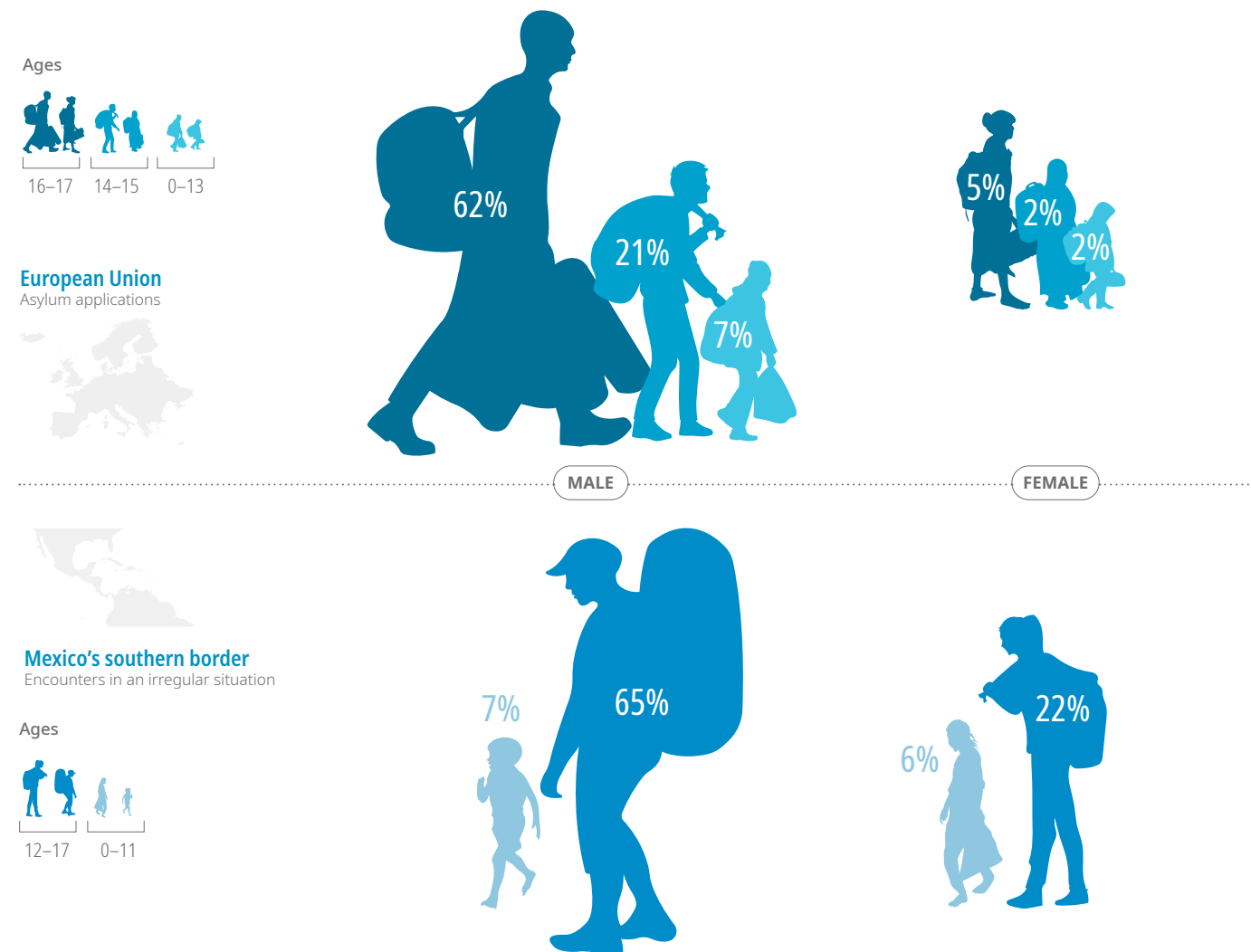
Between 2014 and 2024, a significant majority of unaccompanied child asylum applicants were male, accounting for 90 per cent in the EU,⁴³ 92 per cent in the United Kingdom⁴⁴ and 72 per cent of those encountered at Mexico's southern border.⁴⁵

Similarly, most unaccompanied children arriving in the United States of America were male.⁴⁶

Percentage of male unaccompanied child asylum applicants



Age and sex distribution of asylum applicants in the EU considered to be unaccompanied (n=32,230) and events of unaccompanied children found in irregular situation in Mexico (n=6,203) in 2024



These dynamics may, however, vary by context. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, high demand for domestic workers and limited economic opportunities at home drive many women and girls to seek employment abroad.⁴⁷

In 2019, for instance, females accounted for 70 per cent of Indonesia's temporary labour migration.⁴⁸ While age-disaggregated data are limited, many of these migrant domestic workers are likely to be girls.⁴⁹

Unaccompanied and separated girls are likely to be missing from the data for a number of reasons, which include:^{50, 51, 52}



working in less visible sectors such as domestic work



arriving within groups and appearing to be part of a family



being coerced or instructed by traffickers or smugglers to claim that they are over 18 years old



Call for data

Gender-responsive approaches must be integrated across the entire data ecosystem – from collection and analysis through to outputs and policy recommendations – supported by comprehensive training for all data stakeholders.





Inside the data: Reporting on unaccompanied and separated children in Italy

Every six months, Italy's Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policies of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies publishes an in-depth report on the presence of unaccompanied foreign children. These reports are the country's primary and most up-to-date resource on these children, analysing key characteristics such as age, sex, citizenship, territorial distribution and legal status (e.g., international protection). Pathways within the reception system, including the average duration of stay and voluntary abandonment of reception centres, are also examined.

The reports monitor the evolution of the country's population of unaccompanied and separated children in both quantitative and qualitative terms by comparing different analysis indicators with data from previous periods. They also provide updates on relevant national and EU-level legislative developments and reference contributions from international institutions addressing specific aspects like family tracing, guardianship or integration measures.

The Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policies also prepares and publishes monthly statistical reports on unaccompanied and separated children in Italy. These statistics feed into

official national demographic data sets managed by the Italian National Institute of Statistics, which are then incorporated into broader migration and population statistics. This integration ensures that figures on unaccompanied and separated children are aligned with Italy's official statistical standards and can be compared with other national and EU-level demographic indicators. Such cross-referencing strengthens policy planning and allows for consistency in reporting obligations under both national and European frameworks.

A dedicated dashboard on the presence, entries and exits of these children within and from the reception system is also publicly available in Italian and English. The dashboard, which is updated monthly, enables interactive exploration and downloads of data, enhancing transparency and facilitating the work of researchers, journalists, policymakers and civil society actors. This reporting system aligns with European Migration Network guidelines on unaccompanied children data collection and complements Italy's obligations under the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021–2024) and the Global Compact for Migration.

For more information, see [here](#).

5. Crises can significantly and rapidly increase the number of unaccompanied and separated children.

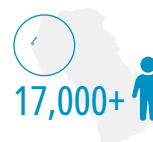
Crises – including armed conflict, economic instability, disasters and political repression – often lead to a sharp rise in the number of migrant and displaced children on their own. These emergencies force a large number of children to flee alone, either after losing family members, being separated during displacement or being sent away by parents seeking to protect them from forced recruitment, persecution or violence.



Since the outbreak of the **war in Sudan** in 2023 and up to early 2025, more than 4,300 Sudanese children on the move without a parent or caregiver have been registered with UNHCR.⁵³



The **conflict in Yemen** has had devastating impacts on children's lives, with at least 1,200 unaccompanied children living in displacement in 2018.⁵⁴



In the **Gaza Strip**, UNICEF estimated in 2024 that at least 17,000 children – or 1 per cent of Gaza's total population – were displaced and unaccompanied or separated from their families.⁵⁵



Call for data

Data collection must keep pace with rapidly evolving situations through real-time monitoring and early warning systems that anticipate displacement flows and secondary movements. Timely, progressive data collection – complemented by big data analytics – enables organizations to move from reactive responses to proactive protection of the most vulnerable children.



Climate change is also emerging as a factor that exacerbates the drivers of migration in emergency settings,⁵⁶ although the full extent of this relationship for children on the move alone has yet to be documented.⁵⁷



Crisis typically interacts with other drivers of movement. The interplay of violence, food insecurity and deterioration of infrastructure and public services has been tied to patterns of migration and displacement among Venezuelan children.⁵⁸



A 2016 study in **Central America's Northern Triangle** found that one in three interviewed unaccompanied children cited more than one reason for migrating, such as better economic or educational opportunities, family reunification and escaping violence.⁵⁹



A 2021 qualitative study in the **Horn of Africa** found that three of four children and young people migrate for a mix of reasons: some primarily for economic opportunities, others out of concern for their safety and security, and many due to a combination of factors.⁶⁰

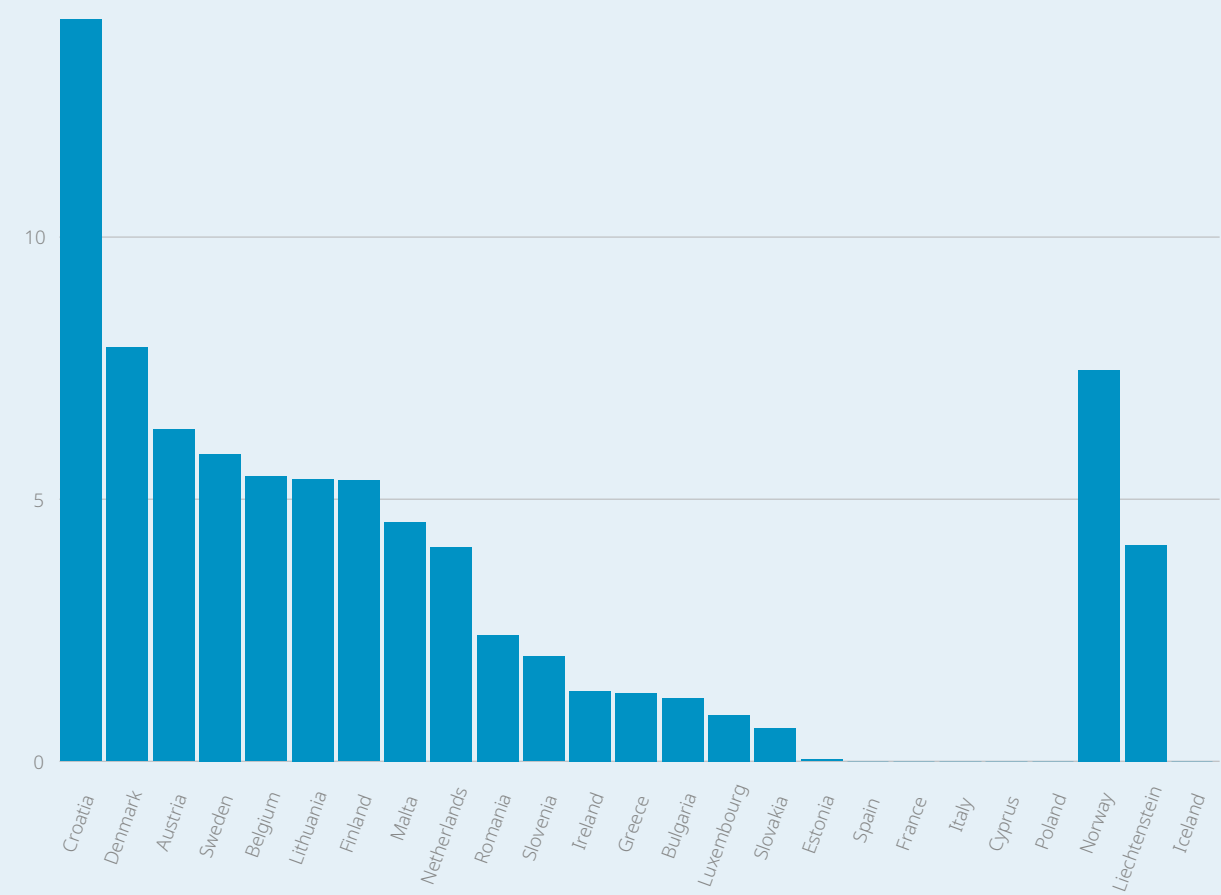
Inside the data: How many displaced Ukrainian children are alone?

By the end of June 2025, 4.2 million people who fled Ukraine due to the war were under temporary protection in the EU, along with 152,000 in European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland).⁶¹ Among these displaced individuals, around 1.3 million (31 per cent) in the EU⁶² and 42,400 (28 per cent) in EFTA countries were children. But how many of them were unaccompanied? And where were these children living?

Since March 2022 and as of June 2025, 22 EU countries⁶³ and all EFTA countries⁶⁴ have provided

data on unaccompanied children fleeing the crisis in Ukraine.⁶⁵ In absolute numbers, Austria (2,715), the Netherlands (1,930) and Lithuania (1,785) granted the highest numbers of temporary protection statuses to unaccompanied children. Croatia reported the highest proportion of unaccompanied children among children granted temporary protection, at 14 per cent.⁶⁶ Based on EU and EFTA data among countries that reported non-zero values, the proportion of unaccompanied children among the total number of children granted temporary protection is on average 3.6 per cent.

FIGURE 1 | Share of unaccompanied children in the total number of children granted temporary protection between March 2022 and June 2025 (%)



Source: Eurostat, 2025.





LIFE ON THE MOVE ALONE:

Risks and deprivations, hopes
and dreams



Unaccompanied and separated children face significant risks to their well-being, both during their journeys and after reaching their destinations. They are more likely than their peers in host communities to experience food insecurity, poverty, barriers to accessing health care and interruptions to their education. They may be exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse, or endure encampment, detention, denial of entry or limited access to child-friendly reception and asylum procedures.

This report focuses on three key dimensions of the well-being of unaccompanied and separated children, selected on the basis of data availability:



health



education



child protection

It is important to note that children on the move without a parent or caregiver are also likely to face rights deprivations in other areas not addressed in this report, such as access to safe drinking water, proper sanitation and adequate hygiene services. Moreover, the experiences of marginalized groups, including stateless children and children

with disabilities, remain critical areas for further investigation.

As the first-person accounts throughout this section illustrate, every unaccompanied or separated child has a unique story, shaped by trials and triumphs. Their journeys – both literal and figurative – vary widely depending on factors such as age, sex, migration route, country of arrival and care arrangements.

Investing in data and research that capture their individual circumstances is vital to evidence-based policymaking and programming that simultaneously protect and empower all children on the move, whether on their own or not.

“The journey was long and arduous, spanning 10 days. I travelled with strangers, many of whom were also fleeing difficult circumstances.”

– Ana, who travelled unaccompanied at age 15





Health

In the absence of a parent or caregiver, unaccompanied and separated children face serious threats to their physical and mental health – many with consequences that extend well into adulthood. Limited access to health-care services, including vaccination programmes and sexual and reproductive health care for girls, coupled with broader challenges such as political instability, conflict, poverty, poor hygiene and insufficient nutrition in countries of origin and along mixed movement routes, all contribute to heightened risk of illnesses.⁶⁷

A significant number of unaccompanied and separated children arrive in host communities with urgent health-care needs⁶⁸ – e.g., communicable diseases, respiratory and gastrointestinal infections, skin conditions and malnourishment – stemming from the conditions they faced prior to and during their journeys.^{69, 70} Vaccination coverage among this group of children is often low, increasing their susceptibility to preventable diseases.⁷¹ Unintentional injuries, such as those caused by road traffic crashes, poisoning or suffocation, are also commonly reported.⁷²

This section focuses on three areas that are key to monitoring the health of unaccompanied and separated children⁷³ – especially adolescents – and for which the most data are currently available: 1) health care; 2) mental health; and 3) food security and nutrition.

Health care

Around the world, children navigating migration and displacement on their own frequently face financial and legislative barriers to exercising their right to health care. Many have low health literacy and limited awareness of available services, while cultural barriers – including language difficulties and a lack of cultural competency among health-care providers – further impede access. Examples of these challenges have been documented in Europe,^{74, 75} North America^{76, 77} and Africa.⁷⁸

Although international treaties and, in many countries, national legislation recognize unaccompanied and separated children's right to health care, restrictive immigration policies, health system limitations and service provider challenges often prevent these children from accessing essential services.⁷⁹

These hurdles may shift considerably by a country's policies and mechanisms for delivering child-specific essential services. In the United States, for instance, unaccompanied and separated children may face high medical costs and exclusion from national health or insurance programmes, and may lack the necessary documentation to access medical and mental health services.⁸⁰ Similarly, in Europe, migrant and displaced children on their own encounter structural, financial and legislative barriers to getting the health care they are entitled

to, compounded by poor coordination among health-care providers and a lack of information about available services.⁸¹

Access may be influenced by a child's immigration or legal status, or whether the child exists outside the formal system or has been registered by the state and is under its care or that of an authorized caregiver. Further data are needed to understand how access to services differs among unaccompanied and separated children on the move, children on the move with their families, and other children in host communities.

Concerning sexual and reproductive health, comprehensive evidence shows that unaccompanied migrant and refugee girls often face limited access to services, which are also significantly underutilized.^{82, 83} Many refugee settings remain unresponsive or insensitive to these issues, while language barriers further restrict access to existing services.^{84, 85} These studies, however, also identified a critical data gap on the risk factors and needs associated with sexual and reproductive health among unaccompanied migrant children, spotlighting the urgent need for more robust quantitative and qualitative research in this area.

Mental health

Children – and particularly adolescents – who travel alone experience significantly higher risks of mental health challenges than their accompanied peers and non-refugee children.^{86, 87} Research

shows that being unaccompanied upon entering a new country is a major risk factor for negative mental health outcomes,^{88, 89} with these children exhibiting a higher prevalence of conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety.^{90, 91, 92}

Unaccompanied girls are particularly affected by post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms, with gender-based violence and cultural and gender-based norms often shaping these experiences.⁹³ Gender-based norms also influence help-seeking behaviour: In the general population, men are less likely to seek mental health services than women.⁹⁴ More research is needed, however, to understand how this applies to adolescent boys who travel unaccompanied or become separated.

Living arrangements and post-movement experiences also play a crucial role in mental health outcomes. A systematic review of evidence from Western Europe and the United States found that young people, mainly adolescents, living alone or in large-scale institutions or detention centres had worse mental health outcomes than those in foster care or living with family. Moreover, unaccompanied children placed with foster families of the same ethnic background had better mental health outcomes than those placed with families of different ethnicities.⁹⁵ Evidence also suggests that unaccompanied and separated children in more supportive living arrangements, such as foster care, experience better mental health outcomes than those in semi-independent settings, such as group homes.⁹⁶

In their own words: Stories from around the globe



Oussam, Mahamat, Djibril*

Sudan → Chad

“People came on motorbikes at dawn and attacked us in our neighbourhood.”

Oussam, aged 17, Mahamat, aged 15, and their little brother Djibril, aged 4, arrived unaccompanied to Adré, a town in eastern Chad on the border with Sudan, after violence changed their lives forever in June 2023.

“People came on motorbikes at dawn and attacked us in our neighbourhood in El-Geneina. Our mother was killed in front of us. And we don't know where our father is,” the brothers reported.

Oussam, Mahamat and Djibril had travelled without their parents by foot, following other people fleeing the town, eventually finding refuge in a secondary school.

“The night we arrived in Adré, we had nothing to eat. It was only this morning that another refugee shared his food with us.”

* Some names have been changed and stories have been edited for voice and clarity. ©UNICEF/UNI398997Mahamat.

Social isolation, discrimination and a lack of resources further exacerbate mental health symptoms for both unaccompanied and accompanied adolescents, while trauma experienced before, during or after movement is strongly associated with higher rates of mental health problems across all groups.⁹⁷ This underscores the importance of protective factors like stable environments and social support systems in mitigating the impact of such adverse experiences on children travelling alone.

Food security and nutrition

While global reviews highlight high rates of food insecurity among refugee and migrant children, the extent of this issue varies significantly by factors such as location, socio-economic status and living conditions.⁹⁸ The data on unaccompanied and separated children’s access to adequate nutrition remain limited.

In one of the few studies focused on this issue, a survey conducted in a camp in Greece found that many unaccompanied refugee children were entirely dependent on camp-provided food, with the vast majority reporting hunger at least once a week, and that many of these children were underweight.⁹⁹ These findings highlight the urgent need for more comprehensive data on the food security and nutritional status of children who are on the move on their own to inform targeted interventions.



The role of gender

Data show that gender plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences described in this section before, during and after movement.¹⁰⁰ It influences maladaptive strategies (risk factors) and coping mechanisms (protective factors), the drivers and motivations for migration, exposure to risks and integration strategies.¹⁰¹

While gender can be viewed as a risk multiplier,^{102, 103} it can also play a role in resilience and adaptability.^{104, 105, 106} Various social, cultural and economic gender-based norms shape the lives of children on the move on their own, underscoring the need for better data and evidence to understand more fully the influence of gender on the migration journey.

Gender dynamics often determine whether boys or girls leave home on their own. In many cases, boys migrate in search of work to support their families, reinforcing traditional views of men as breadwinners.¹⁰⁷ Conversely, girls are often expected to stay behind to care for relatives or migrate only through marriage or family reunification, which may be considered more socially acceptable.¹⁰⁸

The 2019 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, however, noted an increasing number of women migrating independently, leading to the so-called “feminization of migration”.¹⁰⁹ This trend is particularly evident in Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar, where females from poor rural communities migrate for domestic work in order to improve their families’ economic situation.¹¹⁰ While age-disaggregated data are limited, many of these domestic workers are likely girls.¹¹¹

Concerns about gender-based violence may also partly explain why boys are more prevalent among children travelling alone on many routes. Boys are often perceived as better equipped to handle migration risks, such as long journeys, harsh conditions and potential exploitation or violence.¹¹² Families may see sending boys as less risky, whereas girls are viewed as more vulnerable to gender-based violence, trafficking and forced labour.^{113, 114}

Cultural norms further shape migration trends. In Senegal, for example, young men’s migration is often seen as a rite of passage linked to social mobility and future marriage prospects.^{115, 116} These patterns may vary within countries themselves, driven by regional differences in social norms and levels of sociocultural acceptance of migration by females.¹¹⁷

Research on the role of gender in the lives of children on the move on their own is often constrained by the small sample sizes of girls in migration studies.¹¹⁸ This limitation affects the availability of reliable data, making it difficult to fully understand the specific challenges, risks and coping mechanisms of girls compared to boys.

Without comprehensive, gender-disaggregated data, policymakers and organizations will face challenges in designing targeted interventions that address the distinct needs of unaccompanied girls and boys effectively. Expanding data efforts to capture a more balanced gender representation is essential for generating meaningful insights and improving support systems for all children on the move without a parent or caregiver.

In their own words: Stories from around the globe



Mandy*
Uganda → South Africa

I'm a queer activist and asylum-seeker from Uganda currently living in a refugee shelter in South Africa. In 2014, when I was 16 years old, I disclosed my gender identity as a trans woman to a school friend and was then caught having a romantic relationship. My parents disowned me and threatened my life; the Ugandan authorities imprisoned me.

I escaped from prison with nothing but some identity cards. A truck driver brought me to the Zambian-Ugandan border. He was kind enough to communicate on my behalf and ask official authorities for safety. In Zambia, I was harassed, arrested and imprisoned again for another three days due to my gender identity. These traumatic experiences have greatly impacted my mental health.

Now I live in South Africa, where I've applied for asylum and volunteer for a local NGO that supports members of the LGBTQ community. Due to a lack of proper documentation, my asylum application is very complex and I've been unable to receive access to employment or educational opportunities. I dream of having a good relationship with my parents and being able to live freely in the future.

* Some names have been changed and stories have been edited for voice and clarity. Courtesy of the Migration, Youth and Children Platform (MYCP).

“I was harassed, arrested and imprisoned due to my gender identity.”



Education

Unaccompanied and separated children face significant challenges in accessing and succeeding in education, such as frequent disruptions to their schooling and balancing work and study. They have also been shown to have poorer educational outcomes when compared to accompanied or native-born children. Many children on the move without family support – whether financial, emotional or both – struggle to navigate new learning environments; for some, this marks their first exposure to formal education.¹¹⁹ As education is one of the most powerful tools for sociocultural and economic integration, it is essential to understand and address these barriers.

Disruption and access barriers

Children on the move without a parent or caregiver often experience prolonged interruptions to their education and limited access to formal schooling.^{120, 121} In transit countries, many children lack documentation or are legally barred from accessing education due to restrictive nationality laws, preventing them from attending school en route. Moreover, very few immigration detention centres provide educational opportunities for children.

Even in host countries where education is available within months of arrival, delays in school enrolment are common due to administrative barriers such as lengthy asylum application processing.¹²² Age limits for compulsory education are a major obstacle in

many settings, typically set at age 15 or 16; as a result, asylum-seeking children who exceed this age threshold may not have access to formal schooling. Lack of documentation proving previous education, challenges related to age assessments and delays in appointing legal guardians further undermine their right to a quality education.¹²³

Outcomes in the classroom

When able to enrol in school, many unaccompanied and separated children face significant hurdles to achieving academic success and pursuing further education. Uncertainty around immigration status, financial insecurity and limited access to basic services can all take a toll on a child's learning, as can language barriers, prolonged periods out of school before arriving in a host country and unfamiliarity with the local education system.^{124, 125}

Many children who travel alone will have experienced adverse events during their journeys that can impact their emotional well-being, motivation and overall academic performance. They may also be grappling with older age at school admission or limited prior education.¹²⁶ Experiences of racism or discrimination are also common.¹²⁷ Extended stays in reception centres may exacerbate these issues, as education in these settings often suffers from a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate learning materials and significant language barriers.^{128, 129}



In their own words: Stories from around the globe



Ana*

Guatemala → United States

I come from a small, impoverished village in Guatemala, where I lived with my grandmother, who was a midwife. Our life was defined by simplicity and struggle. We had no stove, building a fire in the ground to cook every day.

When I was 7, my grandmother passed away. I moved in with my mother and began working at her shop, managing customers while she handled chores at home.

I excelled at my studies and dreamt of working in health care, inspired by a desire to help others; so, at age 14, I decided to leave Guatemala on my own for the United States. My departure was filled with mixed emotions and my mother and stepfather were very worried about me – but I was determined. I felt ready for the challenges ahead.

The journey was long and arduous, spanning 10 days. I travelled with strangers, many of whom were also fleeing difficult circumstances. I was robbed along the way and lost most of my belongings – except for a precious pair of earrings from my mother that I managed to hide.

As I crossed the desert, the harsh conditions took a toll on me. Crossing the Rio Grande was frightening. I fell to the shore, struggling to find something to hold onto in the dark, swirling waters. A stranger helped me out of the water, a small act of kindness amid the chaos.

When I arrived in the United States, I was placed in a shelter. It was challenging to adjust to a new culture and environment – but seeing the American flag was a moment of joy and a symbol of my new beginning.

My studies are going well and I have taken up cross-country running at my school – I made the varsity team during my first year. My long-term goal is still to work in health care, possibly as a physical therapist. I dream of having my own apartment, decorated just the way I like. Maybe one day I'll even adopt a cat or a dog. Either way, it's important to me that I can help and care for people in need.

* Some names have been changed and stories have been edited for voice and clarity. Courtesy of Kids in Need of Defense (KIND).

“My departure was filled with mixed emotions and my mother and stepfather were very worried about me – but I was determined.”

In the United Kingdom, for instance, asylum-seeking children separated from their parents lag academically, experiencing higher school exclusion and absence rates and averaging over three years behind their non-migrant peers or those living with family members.¹³⁰ Similarly, in Sweden, unaccompanied refugee children take longer to complete secondary education or are more likely to combine work and study compared to accompanied or native-born children.¹³¹

Gender can also play a role in educational outcomes among children on the move on their own. Evidence indicates that migrant girls frequently outperform migrant boys in both reading and mathematics, with gender gaps among migrant pupils exceeding those observed among native pupils.^{132, 133} Research also suggests that girls tend to adapt more effectively to school environments and demonstrate higher levels of compliance with classroom rules.^{134, 135}

There are, however, a number of factors that can positively shift these outcomes and experiences.

When children are granted their right to quality education from an early age; receive the guidance and support they need from caregivers, educators, communities and social networks; are adequately cared for through social protection mechanisms; and have secure migration status, they are more likely to perform better in school.^{136, 137, 138, 139}

Balancing school and work

Without the support of their families or official government sources, unaccompanied and separated children often face financial pressures. Moreover, many send money back to their families while pursuing education, which can introduce further financial constraints.¹⁴⁰ Working while also studying can increase the risk of dropping out, as these competing responsibilities may be less common among their accompanied peers and peers in host communities. In Sweden, for instance, evidence demonstrates that unaccompanied male youth were more likely to combine work and study than accompanied peers.¹⁴¹



Inside the data: Protection risks and support for unaccompanied children in Africa

Between 2022 and 2024, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) engaged 5,122 migrants aged 18–25 years in Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, the Niger, Sudan and Tunisia through 4Mi, MMC's global, standardized data collection system.¹⁴²

By subtracting respondents' reported journey duration from their age at the time of the interview, MMC used its youth module to identify 99 respondents who started their journey as unaccompanied children, including 19 who left home between the ages of 11 and 15. Their profiles and experiences help paint a fuller picture of unaccompanied children on the move.

Among participants who began their journeys as children, top countries of origin were the Central African Republic, Chad and Mali. More boys – 72 per cent (71 respondents) – started their journey as unaccompanied children than girls (28 respondents). Education levels were low, with nearly a third (29 respondents) of the former unaccompanied children having received no education. In contrast, 12 per cent of respondents in the broader sample had not received any education.

The broader sample was also much more urban, with just 30 per cent of respondents originating from rural areas, compared to 45 per cent of the former unaccompanied children having lived in rural areas prior to movement.

Former unaccompanied children described numerous protection risks and abuses during movement (although it is uncertain whether these occurred before or after they had turned 18). Of the 99 former unaccompanied children surveyed:

- nearly three in five experienced physical violence
- more than one in four were subjected to sexual violence
- more than one in four witnessed deaths
- one in four reported having been kidnapped
- two in five experienced detention during their journey
- over one in three experienced ill health or injury during their journey due to harsh conditions

“It's a bad experience, you get kidnapped, thrown into the desert, your family is asked for a ransom... it's a dangerous route.”

– MMC survey respondent

Despite the dangers, support for these children was notably limited: less than half (44 respondents) of those surveyed received assistance en route – predominantly food (27 respondents), water (23 respondents) and shelter (19 respondents).



Protection

Violence

Around the world, escaping violence acts as a major driver in the decision to leave home without a parent or caregiver.¹⁴³ Many children flee in the face of threats in their homes and communities, often exacerbated by disrupted family structures.^{144, 145} A 2017 UNHCR report found that more than half (58 per cent) of unaccompanied children migrating from Central America had suffered harm or faced direct threats of violence, while 48 per cent were personally affected by organized violence.¹⁴⁶ One in five (21 per cent) cited child maltreatment as a cause for movement and one in 10 (11 per cent) reported fearing violence both at home and in society.

Threats of violence, however, often persist along the journey and in countries of transit, destination or asylum, where unaccompanied children remain at risk of harm and exploitation due to insufficient protection mechanisms – as evidenced by reports from multiple countries of widespread violence against children on their own in reception centres.^{147, 148} Violence can also occur en route to a child's destination; for example, in Mexico, a correlation has been found between the presence of organized crime and mixed movement routes.¹⁴⁹

Lacking an adult's emotional and cognitive maturity to assess risks and without the protection of a parent or caregiver, unaccompanied and separated children may be more easily coerced, manipulated

or exploited by non-state armed groups or organized crime in order to meet their immediate needs for food, shelter and safety. In Colombia, migrant and forcibly displaced children have been recruited for drug trafficking, among other activities, and in South Sudan, displaced children are often enticed to join armed groups in exchange for food.^{150, 151}

Sexual violence is an issue of alarming concern among unaccompanied and separated children, with significant risks in their home countries, during movement and upon arrival in destination countries. Girls are particularly vulnerable, often fleeing home to escape rape and sexual violence, as seen in studies on unaccompanied migrants from Guatemala.¹⁵² These dangers may persist in host countries, as seen among girls on the move in France,¹⁵³ Greece,¹⁵⁴ the United Kingdom¹⁵⁵ and the United States.¹⁵⁶

Despite the severity of these issues, underreporting remains a significant barrier, driven by fear of reprisals, stigma and feelings of shame.^{157, 158} Moreover, survivors often face limited access to sexual and reproductive health care, due to barriers including insecure legal status, language difficulties, discrimination, misinformation about available services, lack of awareness, cultural stigma and financial constraints.^{159, 160}

Children on the move without a parent or caregiver

also face risks of death or disappearance while en route to their destinations. Since 2018, UNICEF estimates that approximately 1,500 children have died or disappeared while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea, representing one in five of all deaths recorded on this treacherous route.¹⁶¹ Given that unaccompanied children comprise a substantial proportion of migrants using the Mediterranean routes, it is reasonable to conclude that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are among those who have perished during these dangerous crossings.

Child labour

The link between poverty, economic crises and child labour can also be tied to mobility, with some children migrating on their own in order to work.^{162, 163} Employment can be an important avenue for opportunity and agency, offering a route to improved financial security and helping older children develop skills unavailable at home.¹⁶⁴

Many migrant and displaced children, however, are forced into harmful forms of employment – working without the benefit of legal and social protections, in jobs that interfere with compulsory education, require excessive hours or expose them to hazardous conditions that endanger their development. This last concern is particularly relevant to children under 15 who – if engaged in any work – should be limited to light work only.¹⁶⁵

Many types of rights violations – including violence, environmental dangers and low or non-payment of wages – have been noted among unaccompanied child migrant workers around the world.¹⁶⁶ In Ghana, there is evidence of children on their own being deprived of stable and fair wages, decent accommodation, safe and healthy work environments and proper health care.^{167, 168} In some cases, engaging in child labour can lead to a child becoming temporarily unaccompanied, as seen in evidence from Pakistan.¹⁶⁹

In their own words: Stories from around the globe



Ojas*

South Sudan → Uganda

I'm from a family of three sisters and six brothers. My parents lived in Uganda from 1993 until South Sudan's independence in 2011. But when conflict broke out in South Sudan in 2016, my family was broken apart. Two of my brothers died; I do not know where my parents are. I fled the country with some of my siblings and later reunited with a brother that had arrived in Uganda prior to our arrival.

While we were on the move without our parents, we faced tribal conflicts and had to take spontaneous routes to seek safety. I encountered violence, including beatings, torture and threats at gunpoint by soldiers. During my journey, I spent a week on foot in the forest, experiencing severe shortages of food and water while hiding from armed forces, eventually reaching the Ugandan border. There, my siblings and I received shelter, food, water and medical care from United Nations agencies operating at the border.

Sometimes I felt pressured to share personal information when crossing international borders. My siblings and I had to alter our story, including misrepresenting our tribal identity, to ensure our safety. I initially struggled with the identity of being a refugee, as the conflict disrupted my educational aspirations. The camp offered limited opportunities, leading my siblings and myself to seek education in Uganda, where I obtained a bachelor's degree in social sciences. I also founded a refugee-led organization aimed at empowering youth to become change-makers.

I'm uncertain if I'll ever be able to go back home. But through education, leadership and advocacy, I'm determined to become an agent of change and make a meaningful impact on the world.

* Some names have been changed and stories have been edited for voice and clarity. Courtesy of the Migration, Youth and Children Platform (MYCP).

“While on the move without my parents, [...] I encountered violence, including beatings, torture and threats at gunpoint by soldiers.”

A media investigation in the United States revealed that approximately two thirds of unaccompanied migrant children end up working full-time, with many leaving school due to situations of forced labour, often being in debt to their sponsors for smuggling fees, rent and living expenses. This occurred during a spike in arrivals when the system for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children was overstretched, with inadequate support services for unaccompanied children and their families once they reached local communities.¹⁷⁰

Gender plays a noteworthy role in determining the types of activities unaccompanied and separated children perform and the conditions they face. Migrant girls are disproportionately represented in unpaid or low-paid informal jobs where rights abuses are common, such as domestic or care work.¹⁷¹ When these girls are on their own, they may face a double wage penalty as both migrants and females. Boys may find more opportunities in industries with relatively greater oversight, visibility and pay – such as construction, transport and trade – though working in these environments often exposes them to hazardous conditions that can endanger their well-being.¹⁷²



Nawar*
Syria → Sweden

Following the Syrian revolution in 2011, my family recognized the urgent need for political change and fully supported the protesters in the streets. But this was a dangerous stance. Soon we began to fear for our safety and were forced to relocate to Egypt.

But shortly after settling into our new environment, my parents had to leave in order for my father, who was battling cancer at the time, to be able to receive proper treatment. Not wanting to uproot us again and also facing financial constraints, they left my 14-year-old sister, my 18-year-old brother and me – then aged 16 – alone in Egypt. Even though our separation lasted only a few months, it felt like an eternity as it was the first time we had been apart from our parents.

We tried our best to adapt – attending school, attempting to resume normal life – but we faced the constant anxiety of potentially losing our father. Fortunately, we were able to put that nightmare behind us when he returned to us cancer-free.

Two years later, just after I turned 18, our family was broken apart once again due to complications in our asylum application. To reunite with our parents in Europe, my siblings and I had to take the same perilous route across the Aegean Sea my father had taken before us, one he hoped we would never have to endure.

During the journey, I was torn from my beloved siblings and forced to cross multiple European borders alone, navigating by GPS or relying on traffickers. It was a long and excruciating experience throughout which I feared being caught by authorities. I tried to make myself useful, translating and assisting others who were in a similar situation. After three months on my own, I was finally reunited with my family in Sweden.

This experience shaped me in countless ways. It taught me resilience in the face of uncertainty, adaptability in unfamiliar environments, and the power of human connection even in the most difficult circumstances. Moreover, it instilled in me a profound sense of empathy, unwavering determination and a deep commitment to helping others facing hardship. Now and always, I will be an advocate for the rights of people on the move.

* Some names have been changed and stories have been edited for voice and clarity. Courtesy of the Migration, Youth and Children Platform (MYCP).

In their own words: Stories from around the globe

“I was torn from my beloved siblings and crossed multiple borders in Europe alone, navigating by GPS or relying on traffickers.”

Trafficking

Unaccompanied and separated children on the move – especially girls – face heightened risks of trafficking and exploitation.^{173, 174} Traffickers often target underage victims for sexual exploitation – the most common form of exploitation among unaccompanied children reported in the EU – as well as labour exploitation, forced begging and coercion to commit criminal acts.¹⁷⁵ These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by restrictive travel routes and border enforcement policies that deprive children of regular and safe pathways to move, which can push these children into the hands of smugglers and increase their exposure to human trafficking, kidnapping, blackmail and extortion of family in country of origin.^{176, 177}

Although the true scale of the problem remains unknown, available estimates suggest that trafficking is common and that the number of detected child victims has increased following a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷⁸ UNICEF and the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking indicate that children account for nearly one third of identified trafficking victims worldwide.¹⁷⁹

Child marriage

Girls may migrate alone as an alternative to child marriage at home,^{180, 181} or, when they are travelling unaccompanied, may turn to this harmful coping mechanism as a solution to economic insecurity.¹⁸²

More data are needed to better understand the specific and often invisible experiences of girls who migrate as married children or who migrate to marry, likely as victims of trafficking. Their circumstances may resemble those of other unaccompanied and separated children, as they are often without family support and exposed to significant protection risks.

Justice for children

In many countries, unaccompanied and separated children face barriers such as violence, use of force and administrative and legal challenges at borders, often being denied entry, detained or excluded from asylum procedures.^{183, 184} Even when admitted, their claims are frequently handled without the age- and gender-sensitive considerations required to ensure their safety and well-being.¹⁸⁵ This includes



inadequate screenings, non-presumption of minority and a lack of protection from harm if they are deported.¹⁸⁶

While data on detention remain scarce,¹⁸⁷ unaccompanied and separated children are commonly found among asylum-seekers and refugees in detention centres.^{188, 189} Children in detention often face severe impacts to their physical and mental health, impaired development and exposure to violence or even death.^{190, 191} The detention of children on the move without a parent or caregiver is particularly concerning, as many countries lack a legal framework for guardianship and foster care for children in this situation.¹⁹²

Many unaccompanied and separated children are deprived of the legal advice and adequate representation they may need to understand and participate in legal procedures. Without a guardian, parent, legal representative or state to advocate for their rights, these children often struggle to navigate complex legal systems. Fraudulent immigration services and unscrupulous private attorneys frequently target them, offering substandard or non-existent services at exorbitant fees.¹⁹³ This lack of protection and advocacy on their behalf exposes many of these children to

heightened risks of injustice and harm, including deportation – regardless of the merits of their cases.¹⁹⁴

Discrimination

Many children on the move experience discrimination, xenophobia and stigma throughout their journey, whether in transit, at their destinations or upon return to their places of origin. Studies have shown that discrimination can be prevalent at school, during interactions with health and protection service providers, and in the communities where they live.¹⁹⁵ Perceived discrimination is associated with higher depressive symptoms among unaccompanied children, indicating its serious impact on mental health outcomes, school attendance and children's overall integration experiences.¹⁹⁶

As with other dimensions described in this brief, data on unaccompanied and separated children's experiences of discrimination remain limited. Further evidence is needed to better understand the risk and resilience processes that influence how these children encounter and respond to discrimination, especially considering their right to safe, inclusive and supportive environments.¹⁹⁷





A RIGHT TO BE COUNTED:

Tackling the data challenges



Accurate data are the cornerstone of effective, scalable preventative and response services for unaccompanied and separated children, while also providing vital evidence that can be used to advocate for specialized services that address family separation. Significant gaps in data on these children's experiences exist worldwide, however, with regions home to large populations of children travelling alone – i.e., sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America – remaining concerning underrepresented in the evidence base.

This section outlines the challenges underlying these data gaps, proposes solutions, highlights achievements in developing and rolling out guidance and standards of data collection on unaccompanied and separated children, and shares best practices from IDAC members. It includes insights from an October 2024 IDAC survey, based on responses from 10 national statistical offices or line ministries across Africa, Europe, Latin America and Asia, as well as contributions from UNHCR, Eurostat, civil society organizations and academia. While not a comprehensive global assessment, the qualitative responses – presented as key quotes throughout this section – offer valuable perspectives to help guide investments in better data on unaccompanied and separated children.

By examining the relevant complexities and solutions in their own contexts, while also learning from successful strategies implemented by partners, national statistical offices and other IDAC stakeholders can take meaningful, sustainable next steps towards improving the collection, analysis, dissemination and use of data on unaccompanied and separated children.

Why is the evidence base on unaccompanied and separated children so limited?

! **Challenge #1: Non-standardized terminologies and methodologies**

Variations and inconsistent usage of national definitions and data collection methodologies – particularly concerning definitions for 'unaccompanied' and 'separated' children, but also in terms of categories such as migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons – hampers the comparability of data. These discrepancies make it difficult to draw meaningful insights across regions or organizations.

not include targeted questions or strategies to identify children on the move without a parent or caregiver.

For example, household surveys typically focus on standard family structures and exclude child-led households, which are a significant but often overlooked segment of the unaccompanied population of children on the move. Additionally, identifying children on their own living outside of conventional household settings – such as those in informal settlements, on the streets or in institutional care – is particularly difficult due to the lack of data collection approaches specifically designed for these settings.

! **Challenge #2: Methodological and system constraints**

Traditional data collection methods, such as interviews, questionnaires and online surveys, often fail to capture information specific to unaccompanied and separated children. Many of these methodologies are designed for general populations or for children in households and do

Migrant and displaced children often lack proper documentation or may choose not to disclose their age due to fear of legal repercussions, deportation or separation from their support networks. Without official identification, accurately assessing a child's age becomes challenging, leading to potential

misclassification or states not applying the presumption of minority, i.e., treating an individual as a child unless and until proven otherwise. Some adults may falsely claim to be children to access certain protections, while some children may misrepresent their circumstances – such as claiming to be accompanied by direct relatives – to avoid placement in institutional care or facilitate movement across borders.¹⁹⁸

! Challenge #3: Fear of being detected and mistrust of authorities

Many children travelling alone remain hidden or avoid regular migration and asylum channels due to fear of deportation, legal consequences or losing their ability to work; some are coerced or instructed to do so by traffickers or smugglers. Limited legal pathways, distrust of authorities, lack of documentation and insufficient information further contribute to this reluctance.

Some children on the move on their own bypass official systems to stay with family or trusted adults, even in irregular situations, while families may avoid legal channels to prevent separation. These factors make unaccompanied and separated children difficult to identify and track in administrative data or across borders.

In some cases, unaccompanied children placed under the temporary care of migration and asylum authorities leave the authority's supervision, eliminating the opportunity to monitor the well-being of these children after their disappearance.¹⁹⁹

“One of the main challenges we encountered while collecting data on [unaccompanied and separated children] was the limited cooperation from certain populations, often due to mistrust or fear. Additionally, some individuals, for self-serving reasons, would misreport their age which complicated the accuracy of the data.”

– IDAC survey respondent

! Challenge #4: Reaching children in transit

In countries that serve as transit hubs – where children stay for short periods of time en route to their intended final destination – data on unaccompanied and separated children are difficult to collect. As many of these children are in irregular situations, lacking proper documentation and absent from administrative data systems, they are hard to reach through traditional data collection mechanisms.

“Unaccompanied migrant children are often in constant transit or in irregular situations, making it difficult for [the national statistical office] to access these populations.”

– IDAC survey respondent



Inside the data: Monitoring the well-being of unaccompanied and separated children in a transit country

Per national law, Serbia's Commissariat for Refugees and Migration is required to identify and record vulnerabilities for all persons entering the reception system. Data on basic personal information (name, sex, date of birth, nationality), legal guardianship, associated vulnerabilities and enrolment in education, among other details, are collected for all children travelling without a parent or caregiver.

As a transit country where unaccompanied and separated children tend to remain for only a short period of time, Serbia faces challenges in the continuous monitoring of the well-being and access to services among this population. There are also questions of the reliability of some statistics, such as those capturing vulnerabilities including early pregnancy, certain chronic illnesses, family violence and victims of trafficking.

In some cases, data collectors lack the time needed to establish trust with children travelling alone, many of whom have had negative interactions with officials along their journeys and may be unwilling to cooperate and provide precise data. Some unaccompanied and separated children intentionally provide inaccurate information to avoid being returned to their country of origin or somewhere else along their route.

In terms of data analysis, there are also obstacles to monitoring the well-being of unaccompanied and separated children over time – such as improvements in school, outcomes of different health conditions and immunization coverage. Consequently, the collected data allow only for overall statistics and trends for whole populations or groups.

Serbia has taken this challenge seriously and invested in data collection to improve the effectiveness of essential services for all migrant, refugee and foreign-born children – including those who are on their own. This is most notable in efforts to improve access to education and academic performance.

Since the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2015, UNICEF in Serbia, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, has provided system-strengthening support to enable the rapid and unconditional enrolment of all migrant, refugee and foreign-born children into formal education. A strategy to collect and update data on migrant and refugee children was developed, with MoE, schools and reception/asylum centres all contributing to data collection efforts. This collaborative three-way exchange of data on children in education informed measures related to policy development and capacity-building for teachers to support learning and integration of migrant, refugee and foreign-born children and their parents, while also allowing for the Serbian Government to ensure timely enrolment of children in schools and the provision of quality and inclusive education.

The data also helped UNICEF and national partners to directly support schools and communities in need that were host to the largest numbers of migrant, refugee and foreign-born children. As a result of this collaborative approach to data collection, data in 2021 showed that as many as 80 per cent of children on the Balkan route were enrolled in schools during their time in Serbia.

! Challenge #5: Lack of coordination and sharing of data

While many national ministries and non-national stakeholders may collect relevant data, poor coordination, bureaucratic obstacles and unclear responsibilities in terms of ownership and management often stand in the way of effective sharing of information. As a result, even where data exist, they are frequently underutilized, which not only obscures the scale of children on the move on their own but also hinders the development of coordinated policies and programmes tailored to their needs.



! Challenge #6: Limited resources and political will

In many contexts, children on the move without a parent or caregiver are neither recognized nor prioritized as a marginalized population in need of specialized support, leading to significant barriers – political, financial and institutional – when it comes to producing statistics on this group of children. Overt unwillingness from authorities may also play a role as they may seek to circumvent duty of care. Furthermore, national statistical systems often lack the infrastructure and resources to systematically collect and analyse data on this population.

“Resource constraints are also an issue, particularly in terms of human resources and funding dedicated to collecting and analysing [unaccompanied and separated child]-specific data.”

– IDAC survey respondent

Inside the data: Legislative pathways to better data on unaccompanied and separated children in Europe

In 2024, 253,000 asylum applicants in the EU were under 18 years old, accounting for 25 per cent of all applicants. Among these, approximately 33,000 (13 per cent) were unaccompanied – children travelling without parents or legal guardians. The arrival of unaccompanied children has been a persistent challenge, particularly between 2014 and 2017, when Europe received relatively large numbers of asylum-seekers — nearly 200,000 of whom were unaccompanied children.

Growing numbers of children on the move and increasing policy urgency have driven demand for more reliable and granular data to better understand child movement patterns and inform protection measures. Before 2021, only annual aggregate figures on unaccompanied children were

available, limiting policymakers' ability to respond effectively. The 2020 amendment to Regulation (EC) No 862/2007, however, significantly enhanced EU migration statistics by introducing more frequent, timely and disaggregated data, particularly on unaccompanied children. Since January 2021, Eurostat has expanded data collection to include asylum applications, decisions, Dublin procedures and irregular migration returns involving unaccompanied children.

Further improvements came in 2022, when EU and EFTA countries began reporting temporary protection status grants for unaccompanied children fleeing Ukraine. These advancements help track displacement trends and ensure tailored support for these vulnerable children.



What can be done to improve data and statistics on unaccompanied and separated children?



Solution #1: Standardize definitions

Definitions of 'unaccompanied' and 'separated' children in line with the Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 6 must be standardized across all national systems to ensure consistent identification of these children.

Clear definitions of variables like migratory, refugee, asylum-seeker or internal displacement status are also necessary to ensure data comparability and enable the use of standardized surveys or assessments. Building upon the guidelines from the United Nations Expert Group on Migration Statistics and the United Nations Expert Group on Refugee, Internally Displaced Persons, and Statelessness Statistics (EGRIS), and to simplify and streamline data collection processes, IDAC has produced [a guideline](#) on indicators for children on the move, which includes specifics on unaccompanied and separated children.²⁰⁰

IDAC survey respondents recognized that international organizations can help implement standards and best practices in order to improve the evidence base on children on the move without a parent or caregiver.

To support data collection efforts in humanitarian settings, UNICEF and UNHCR spearheaded collaborative, inter-agency efforts within the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action to promote a common language and consistent methodological approaches, with a focus on defining standardized data categories for child protection case management and distinguishing between different risks and vulnerabilities.²⁰¹



Solution #2: Employ responsive, tailored methodologies

Determining unaccompanied or separated child migrant status often requires specific questions about relationships with the householder or clearly defined relationships within the household roster, which may not always be feasible in standard data collection practices. In addition to deploying the necessary workforce mandated to identify, address and report on family separation issues – e.g., asylum officials, border police, social and parasocial workers – methodologies that include indicators and outreach strategies specific to children on the move without a parent or caregiver are essential to ensuring their experiences and needs are accurately documented and addressed. Examples of such indicators could include the percentage of unaccompanied and separated children placed in appropriate and protective care arrangements, or the proportion who have been successfully reunited with their caregivers.

Systems for locating and identifying migrant and displaced children on their own also need to be strengthened. This may involve engaging with a wide range of stakeholders and visiting key locations, including residential children's homes, welfare institutions, temporary shelters and areas where separation is likely to occur, such as transportation hubs and health-care facilities. The tailored methodologies should always include ethical safeguards and data protection measures. The Inter-agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children's *Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children* (2017) provides detailed guidance on maintaining confidentiality and ensuring informed consent, which are critical when working with this vulnerable population.²⁰²

The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action's *Inter-agency Child Protection Case Management Guidelines* (2024) and the UNHCR *Best Interests Procedure Guidelines* (2021) for refugee and asylum-seeking children offer comprehensive guidance on secure, safe and ethical data management in casework, including data protection and information-sharing protocols.²⁰³ This resource clarifies roles and responsibilities, recommends conducting data protection impact assessments and outlines how unaccompanied and separated children can be properly identified and provided with appropriate services.



Inside the data: Improving Multi-Sector Needs Assessment tools to protect unaccompanied and separated children – Lessons from IMPACT Initiatives and UNICEF

In 2024, IMPACT Initiatives and UNICEF released a report analysing 41 Multi-Sector Needs Assessments (MSNAs) conducted between 2021 and 2023 across 19 countries in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.²⁰⁴ The study aimed to improve understanding of unaccompanied and separated children in humanitarian crises, estimate the proportion of households potentially requiring family tracing and reunification (FTR) and examine how care practices for these children vary across different population groups – including refugees, internally displaced persons and non-displaced communities.

In the 14 contexts where relevant data were available, 1 in 10 households reported hosting at least one unaccompanied or separated child. Female-headed households showed a higher likelihood of doing so. Households experiencing severe food insecurity and limited coping mechanisms were also significantly more likely to host unaccompanied or separated children.

While the report notes that these findings reflect only a subset of all cases involving children on their own – since many children are likely missed due to reliance on adult-reported data from heads of households, authorities or aid agencies – it provides several key recommendations to improve future MSNAs:

- **Include child-headed households:** To better capture the full scope of child separation, future MSNAs should incorporate mechanisms to identify child-headed households. Enumerators should be able to flag instances where interviews could not be conducted due to the absence of an adult respondent. Where appropriate, age-sensitive and ethically sound methods should be developed to include children's perspectives.
- **Standardize questions on hosting unaccompanied and separated children:** Consistent questions across MSNAs regarding hosting these children would enhance data quality and comparability. This includes defining the age range for unaccompanied and separated children and clearly outlining what constitutes 'hosting'.
- **Enhance data richness:** Expanding data collection to include reasons for children living outside their household, refining separation timing and asking directly about the need for FTR services would significantly improve data depth and accuracy. This would help better estimate the number of children in need of FTR, strengthen causal analysis of separation factors (such as shocks or crises) and improve the identification of protection needs. These improvements must, however, be balanced against the need to keep MSNA tools streamlined and avoid questions that could be sensitive or retraumatizing in certain contexts.





Solution #3: Build trust and cooperation

Transparent communication about the purpose of data collection and strict data privacy protocols are essential for gaining the trust of children on the move on their own, ensuring they feel adequately safeguarded in sharing personal information about their experiences. These communication efforts should be informed and guided by the perspectives of the children themselves.

“We have mitigated [mistrust] by emphasizing that our goal is not to identify the criminal activities of the children but rather to restore their legal rights.”

– IDAC survey respondent



Solution #4: Leverage different types of data and harness innovation

Qualitative assessments that utilize child participation methods can overcome ethical and methodological obstacles commonly associated with interviewing children in quantitative surveys. These methods allow for more nuanced understanding while prioritizing the well-being of children who are on the move without a parent or caregiver.

At the same time, the increasing complexity of child mobility requires advanced data approaches capable of securely handling large and multifaceted data sets. A systematic approach to transforming administrative data into statistical outputs can enhance the availability of reliable, real-time information on unaccompanied and separated children.

Innovative data sources and digital transformation are reshaping how mobility data are collected and analysed and offer important opportunities to complement traditional methods. These approaches can enhance the ability to generate timely, accurate and cost-effective data on migrant and displaced children on their own.



How digital tools can help protect unaccompanied and separated children

Considering that many unaccompanied and separated children are adolescents, social media often work as a channel for communication, orientation and overall support in their lives. Social media enable them to stay connected with family members while establishing new relationships in host communities (both within and outside the migrant population). Digital platforms also enhance access to information and can help improve stability and integration.

When it comes to using mobile phone and social media data as reliable sources on children, however, there are a number of factors to consider. For one, these data sources often reflect adult usage, as children are less likely to own phones. Furthermore, accurately identifying unaccompanied and separated children within data sets and ensuring that these data are demographically representative is another challenge. Privacy and confidentiality are additional important concerns.

Nonetheless, when combined with other sources like surveys, mobile phone and social media data can provide valuable insights into youth on the move. Advances in network science, machine learning and artificial intelligence make it possible to use these data to map vulnerabilities and monitor public health and education trends. Systems like UNICEF’s U-Report – a social messaging tool and data collection platform designed for youth – capture real-time insights from young people across the world that can help guide child-centred policies and programming. As mobile and digital access expands in low- and middle-income countries, the current data bias towards high-income contexts may gradually decrease.

Mobile and social media data offer great potential to derive important insights on unaccompanied and separated children and guide evidence-based policies and programmes – as long as they are used in a responsible, ethical manner that respects children’s rights.



Solution #5: Improve inter-agency, cross-sectoral coordination and ensure data are visible, accessible and usable

Strengthening collaboration and data-sharing agreements between government agencies, international organizations and statistical bodies can streamline processes, set protocols, reduce duplication and improve the accuracy of data on children on the move without a parent or caregiver. Establishing centralized data systems and standardized protocols would facilitate real-time information exchange.

“Agreements, alliances or strategies that adapt to the needs of each country and that contribute to the changes that we intend to implement help us demonstrate our solidarity with the realities of this population.”

– IDAC survey respondent

For instance, protocols and templates to support safe, secure and ethical information sharing for child protection case management in humanitarian situations have been developed. These tools – which have been endorsed by humanitarian agencies, academic institutions, policymakers, donors and practitioners – outline guiding principles and best practices for data protection, including the collection, processing, storage, sharing and disposal of personal and non-personal data, in line with relevant legal and data protection frameworks.^{205, 206} They serve as important examples of the need for cross-agency coordination in driving efforts to produce standardized data that are more visible, accessible and usable.



Solution #6: Invest in strengthening data systems and capacities

Allocating dedicated resources to staff training, technological infrastructure and research capacity would enhance the accuracy, timeliness and scope of data. Strengthening field operations, expanding survey coverage and integrating digital tools – such as mobile data collection and biometric registration – could further improve data. Strong collaboration



Inside the data: Addressing the data challenges regarding children on the move on their own in Greece

The Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) in Greece systematically collects and integrates administrative data to produce comprehensive statistics on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Rather than relying on specialized surveys, ELSTAT enhances existing administrative data within the national statistical system to ensure accuracy and usability.

To address data fragmentation, ELSTAT promotes cross-agency collaboration and standardizes data collection, storage and reporting. To ensure consistency and quality of data, ELSTAT has provided clear guidelines on how to collect, store and communicate statistical data in a standardized format. By employing tailored methodologies and directly engaging with children travelling alone, ELSTAT was able to overcome challenges posed by the digital-first approach and ensure comprehensive and reliable data collection.

The 2021 Population-Housing Census is one of the key data sources used in this approach. The data collected in the census were highly detailed and comprehensive,

capturing variables such as age, sex, migratory status, education and living conditions for all populations. Although the census was conducted digitally, specific adaptations were made to ensure the inclusion of migrant and displaced children without a parent or caregiver. For unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in camps or other facilities, where digital self-registration was not feasible, ELSTAT deployed specially trained enumerators, who visited the camps and facilities to carry out the data collection in person, ensuring that detailed information on these children was systematically captured.

Transparent communication about the purpose of data collection and strict data privacy protocols were also put in place to build trust. These measures helped increase cooperation and enhance the accuracy of the data collected. Collaborations with relevant stakeholders and pooling of resources ensured the availability of the required human resources and funding to carry out the collection and analysis of data specific to unaccompanied and separated children.

to ensure timely, safe data sharing and use with the front-line practitioners that deliver case management services in humanitarian settings is also critical given their key role in identifying and supporting vulnerable children on the move, such as those travelling without a parent or caregiver.²⁰⁷

Additionally, sustained financial support would enable longitudinal studies and long-term monitoring efforts, ensuring that data collection keeps pace with evolving movement patterns and emerging challenges.

“Consider the needs to implement longitudinal studies and data: to better understand children's experiences and needs over time, which can provide deeper and more sustainable data, allowing for a long-term analysis of the impacts of migration on children.”

– IDAC survey respondent



INVESTING IN THE NEXT GENERATION:

Action in data and policy



Unaccompanied and separated children are entitled to the same regional and international legal protections as any other child. Yet in contexts around the globe – from low-income to high-income, from humanitarian settings to secure, stable communities – their rights are not being upheld.

Given the complexity of the legislative landscape for children on the move without a parent or caregiver, data-driven approaches are essential to ensuring accountability and consistency in policy and programmatic implementation. For instance, in response to the large number of unaccompanied and separated children that have left Ukraine since 2022, UNICEF identified four priority areas requiring improvement to tackle the challenges in the application of international and regional protection laws.²⁰⁸ How can data be used to ensure accountability and consistency in their implementation? The actionable list that concludes this report on the next page examines this question by strategic area.

Data collection and monitoring systems must accurately reflect the lived experiences of the most vulnerable child populations, such as unaccompanied and separated children, to realize a broader vision of a protective environment for all children – one in which data are closely linked to the continuum of essential services they are entitled to.²⁰⁹ At the same time, data and research on unaccompanied and separated children must be collected and processed responsibly and transparently, in ways that build trust and remain sensitive to their perspectives and concerns.

Data are much more than a tool: They are a transformative resource that can drive impactful policies and programmes to help every child on the move – whether on their own or not – realize their full potential. By taking the steps to produce quality data, policymakers can pave the way to timely, targeted and sustainable interventions that improve the lives of unaccompanied and separated children around the globe.





Protecting unaccompanied and separated children: Linking data and children's rights



Legal priority #1: Establishing, recognizing and monitoring legal responsibility, support and assistance arrangements for children

Which data are needed?

Accurate data on demographics of unaccompanied children, migration and displacement trajectories and living conditions

Why are these data needed?

Provide authorities the evidence needed to assign clear responsibilities and monitor the effectiveness of support and assistance arrangements



Legal priority #2: Protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse through the application of national child protection laws, with a particular focus on children in alternative care

Which data are needed?

Standardized data on incidents, service delivery and outcomes

Why are these data needed?

Measure policy effectiveness and pinpoint gaps in protection measures; allow policymakers to monitor compliance with child protection standards, assess the quality of care and hold relevant stakeholders accountable



Legal priority #3: Facilitating access to international protection appropriate to the individual circumstances of the child

Which data are needed?

Data on individual risks, vulnerabilities and needs, such as legal status, access to health care and school outcomes

Why are these data needed?

Enable authorities to design processes that reflect the diversity of experiences among children on the move on their own, ensuring that protection measures are both responsive and effective



Legal priority #4: Identifying comprehensive, secure and sustainable solutions through best interest procedures and supported by transnational cooperation

Which data are needed?

Data on risks, family relations, discrimination and the views of the child

Why are these data needed?

Advance a more accurate understanding of the scale and nature of issues relevant to unaccompanied and separated children; offer the necessary foundation for transnational dialogue and coordinated policy responses; help quantify the problem, promote best practices and build a common framework for action across borders

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LEGAL PROTECTION AND DATA FRAMEWORKS RELEVANT TO UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN



Framework/guidance	Description
Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees , 1951, and its 1967 Protocol	The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are foundational treaties on refugee protection, outlining their rights and the international standards of treatment for their protection. The Convention requires countries to provide UNHCR with periodic information and statistical data on the conditions of refugees.
OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa , 1969	The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention expands the scope of refugee protection beyond the international definition of a ‘refugee’, found in the 1951 Refugee Convention, to protect people fleeing external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order. The Convention requires countries to provide the African Union with periodic information and statistical data on the conditions of refugees.
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989	The most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world, the CRC is a foundational treaty that ensures legal protections and rights for every child. The CRC reaffirms the rights of all children regardless of their or their legal guardians’ nationality, ethnicity or other status. The CRC states that “Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties.”
Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement , 1998	Adopted by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the Guiding Principles is the first and most widely recognized international standard for internally displaced persons. It identifies the rights of internally displaced persons and the obligations of governments towards them and provides guidance to all other actors involved in internal displacement. The Guiding Principles recognizes the special needs of unaccompanied children, calls for all appropriate steps to be taken to expedite the reunion of children with their families, and protects children against forced labour.
Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children , 2000	Establishing parameters for judicial cooperation and exchanges of information among countries, the Protocol on Trafficking is a wide-ranging international agreement that creates global language and legislation to define trafficking in persons, especially of women and children; assist victims of trafficking; and prevent trafficking in persons. It calls on each State party to consider the special needs of children, strengthen measures to alleviate the factors that make them vulnerable to trafficking, and protect victims from revictimization.

Framework/guidance	Description
UNHCR Conclusion on Children at Risk No. 107 (LVIII), 2007	Recognizes that the systematic collection and analysis of age- and sex-disaggregated data, and of data on children with specific needs – such as unaccompanied and separated children – can be useful for states, UNHCR and other relevant agencies and partners in identifying children at heightened risk.
African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), 2009	As the first ever legally binding regional instrument, the Kampala Convention provides a comprehensive framework for response to internal displacement, whether triggered by armed conflict, generalized violence, disasters or the effects of climate change. Recognizing the special needs of internally displaced unaccompanied and separated children, the Kampala Convention calls on State parties to provide special protection and assistance to children on the move without a parent or caregiver and reaffirms their right to obtain necessary identity documents. It urges State parties to create and maintain an updated register of all internally displaced persons within their jurisdiction or effective control, including in collaboration with international organizations, humanitarian agencies or civil society organizations.
2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2015	Adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. With 17 goals and 169 targets, the central promise of the SDGs is to leave no one behind. Target 10.7 is directly related to international migration, calling on countries to facilitate the orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including unaccompanied and separated children. In addition, Target 5.2 to “Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation” and Target 16.2 to “End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children” cover trafficked children, helping to raise global policy attention and action on the issue.
Conclusions of the Council of the European Union and the representatives of the governments of the Member States on the protection of children in migration, 2017	Reaffirming that children in migration have the right to be protected, the 2017 Council Conclusions on Children in Migration invite member states to fully take into account the specific situation and best interests of children, and in particular unaccompanied children as an especially vulnerable category.
Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 2017	This field handbook, together with its accompanying training materials, has been developed by the Inter-agency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children to provide working operational guidance for child protection staff and other actors engaged in the prevention of and response to family separation in emergencies. It builds on and complements existing guiding principles . The handbook seeks to ensure that responses are in line with agreed inter-agency standards, where applicable, and that they remain coordinated and complementary.

Framework/guidance	Description
Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), 2018	As the first intergovernmental agreement to cover all dimensions of international migration, the GCM is designed to support international cooperation and provide a comprehensive toolkit of policy options for states to address some of the most pressing issues around international migration. The GCM has child sensitivity as one of its cross-cutting guiding principles and upholds the principle of the best interests of the child at all times. It contains several protection measures for unaccompanied and separated children, including recommending states to provide children on the move on their own with necessary support at all stages of migration, afford access to health care, education and legal assistance, and train border officials on the rights of the child and child-sensitive procedures. Objective 1 of the GCM commits to improving and investing in collection, analysis and dissemination of data disaggregated by age, sex, migratory status and other characteristics as relevant for individual national contexts.
Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), 2018	The GCR is a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing among governments, international organizations and other key stakeholders to support sustainable solutions for refugee populations and host communities. It recognizes the special needs of children who are unaccompanied or separated and stipulates that states identify their specific vulnerabilities and needs during the registration stage. The GCR recognizes the importance of reliable, comparable and timely data to plan appropriate solutions and improve the socio-economic conditions for both refugees and host communities. It calls for the “development of harmonized or interoperable standards for the collection, analysis, and sharing of age, gender, disability, and diversity disaggregated data on refugees and returnees”.
International Recommendations on Refugee Statistics (IRRS), 2018 International Recommendations on Internally Displaced Persons Statistics (IRIS), 2020 International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics (IROSS), 2023	Developed by the Expert Group on Refugee, Internally Displaced Persons, and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS), a multi-stakeholder group mandated by the United Nations Statistical Commission, the IRRS, IRIS and IROSS provide specific sets of recommendations to improve the production, coordination and dissemination of high-quality official statistics on forced displacement and statelessness that are consistent over time and comparable between regions and countries. The IRRS, which the GCR endorses, recommends unaccompanied status of a child as a basic classificatory variable. The IRIS recommends as basic stock statistics the calculation of the “[t]otal number of [internally displaced] unaccompanied and separated children aged under 18 years, by sex and age”. The IROSS provides a standardized definition of statelessness for the purpose of statistical measurement, and guidance on how to better include stateless persons in national statistical systems.

Framework/guidance	Description
Regulation (EU) 2020/851 of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2020	Amending Regulation (EC) No 862/2007 , which sets out the rules for collecting and compiling statistics on migration, international protection and returns by EU and EFTA countries, the Regulation (EU) 2020/851 introduces additional data and disaggregation on unaccompanied and separated children to be collected and reported by Eurostat.
The Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, 2022	Presenting the Secretary-General's vision to better resolve, prevent and address internal displacement crises, the Action Agenda promotes the best interests of the child as one of its guiding considerations. Recognizing the need for an improved understanding of internal displacement numbers, demographics, socio-economic dynamics and associated trends to strengthen collective action on solutions, the Action Agenda proposes to support states putting in place relevant mechanisms to collect, manage and use internal displacement data in line with IRIS. It further emphasizes the importance of harnessing data to better anticipate future displacement risks.
Practitioners' Handbook on Safeguarding Unaccompanied and Separated Children's Rights through the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, 2024	This guide for professionals working with children on the move in the EU without a parent or caregiver provides understanding of the legal frameworks, principles and best practices for protecting the rights and well-being of unaccompanied and separated children.





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