

Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated

Overview of Trends
January to December 2020



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Some
16,700
children

arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, Cyprus and Malta in 2020 (**17% girls and 83% boys**) - half the number who arrived in 2019 (33,200).



62%

Some
10,300
children

(62% of all child arrivals) children who arrived in Europe in 2020 were **unaccompanied and separated**.



Some
11,300
children

(**24% girls and 28% boys**) were under resettlement procedures in Europe in the first half of 2020.

Of all the children



who sought international protection in Europe in 2020, 75% were registered in just four countries: **Germany (41%), France (15%), Spain (11%) and Greece (8%)**.

Arrivals in Europe between January and December 2020¹

In 2020, **16,750** children arrived in Greece, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Malta. Of these, **10,343** (62%) were unaccompanied or separated children (UASC).² Child arrivals decreased by **50%** in 2020 compared to 2019 (**33,200**).

Greece

Some 4,602³ children arrived by land and sea in 2020, 82% fewer than the previous year (25,443) in line with a broader decline in overall arrivals compared to 2019. Of these, 895 were UASC (19%),⁴ 77% less than in 2019 (3,852). Most of the children, including UASC, were from Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Iraq.

Spain

In 2020, some 3,890⁵ children were estimated to have arrived by sea, only a 3% increase compared to 2019 (3,775). Of these, 3,340 were UASC (86%), 56% more than in 2019 (2,147). According to estimates, most of the children, including UASC, originated from Morocco, Mali, Algeria and Senegal.

Italy

Nearly three times more children arrived in 2020 (6,252) than in 2019 (2,232). Of these, 75% (4,687) were UASC, a proportion consistent with recent years. Most of the children, including UASC, originated from Tunisia, Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea.⁶

Bulgaria

Some 1,125 children lodged asylum applications in 2020, 70% of whom were UASC (798). Most of these asylum-seeking children originated from Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq.⁷

Malta

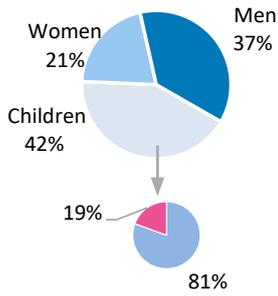
In 2020, some 610⁸ children, including 537 (88%) UASC, arrived following search and rescue operations at sea. Child arrivals, including UASC, in 2020 were 30% lower compared to 2019 (868). Most of the children, including UASC, originated from Sudan, Somalia and Bangladesh.

Cyprus

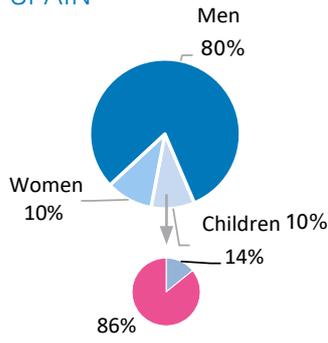
Some 271 children arrived by sea in 2020, including 86 UASC. Most of the children, including UASC, originated from the Syrian Arab Republic and Somalia.

Demographic of Arrivals, including Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children

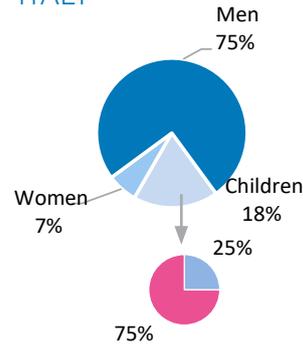
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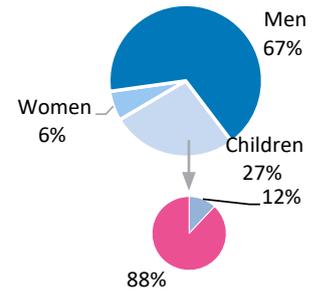
SPAIN



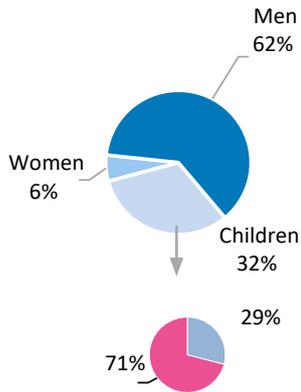
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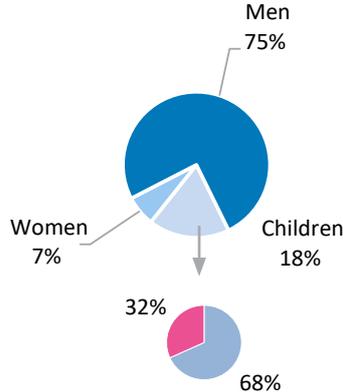
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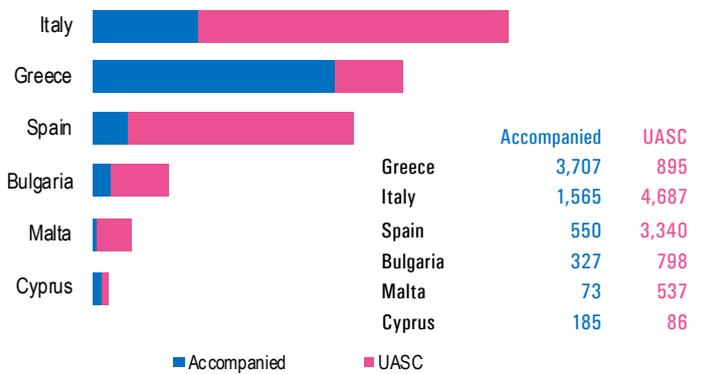
BULGARIA



CYPRUS

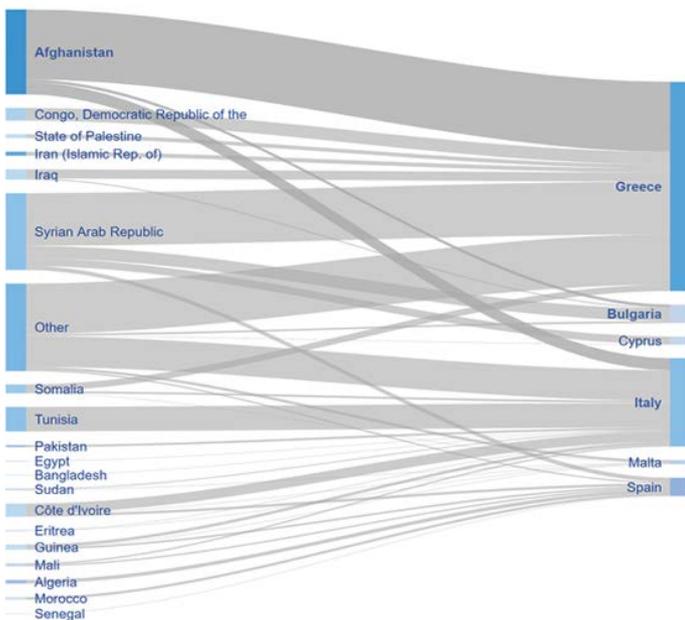


Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children by Country of Arrival

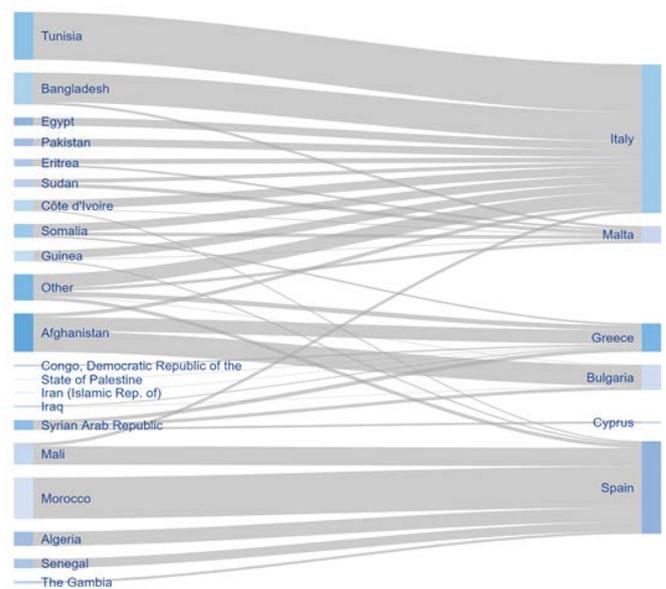


Nationality of Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children by Country of Arrival

Accompanied Children by Country of Origin and Arrival



UASC by Country of Origin and Arrival

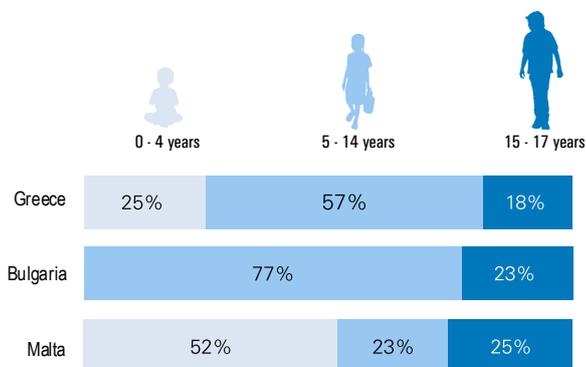


Source: Hellenic Police, EKKA; Italian Ministry of Interior; Bulgaria State Agency for Refugees; Spanish Ministry of Interior (MOI), Spanish Ombudsman; Malta Immigration Police; and Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement, Malta (MHSE).

Age and sex breakdown of all Children by Country of Arrival

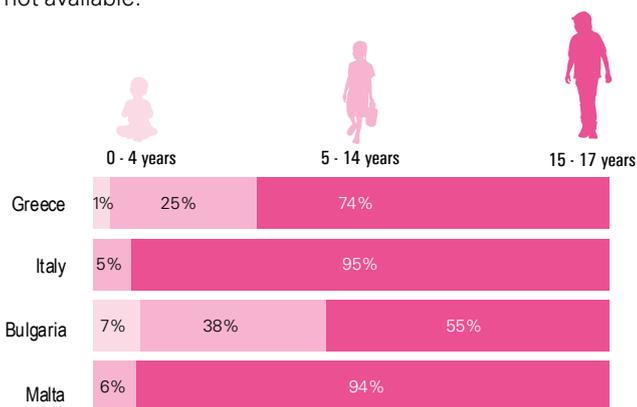
Accompanied Children - Age Breakdown

Among the 4,419 accompanied children who arrived in Greece, Bulgaria and Malta in 2020, 24% were 0-4 years old, 58% were 5-14 years old and 18% were 15-17 years old. The age breakdown for accompanied children in Italy, Spain and Cyprus is not available.



Unaccompanied Children - Age Breakdown

The majority of UASC who arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Malta in 2020 were between 15 and 17 years old (88% overall). Age-disaggregated data on children arriving in Spain and Cyprus is not available.

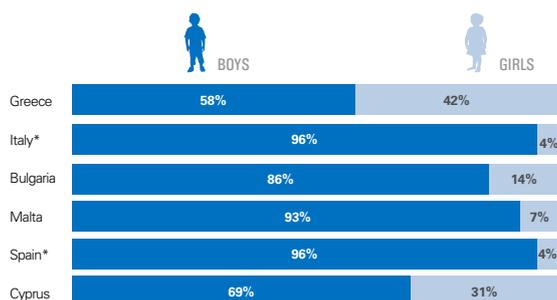


Source: Hellenic Police, EKKA, Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies on UASC in reception, Spanish Ministry of Interior and Social Policy, Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, Maltese Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement (MHSE).

Note: Due to the limited disaggregation or inconsistency of data by age and sex across countries, these graphs refer to estimates.

Sex Breakdown of Children by Country of Arrival

Overall, the proportion of boys remains high, comprising 83% of all children who arrived via the Eastern, Central and Western Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic routes in 2020. The percentage of boys arriving unaccompanied both in Italy and Spain was significantly higher than average, at about 96% each. Meanwhile, the percentage of girls arriving in Greece in 2020 was also significant, comprising 42% of all child arrivals. The proportion of boys among arrivals in Malta remained similar to that in 2019 (92%).



* For Italy, the calculation is based on the estimated 7080 UASC registered in the reception system in 2020, according to the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

* For Spain, the sex breakdown data is based on 9,030 UASC registered in the Foreign Minors Registry as of 31 December 2020, according to the Spanish Ombudsman report 2020

Refugee and Migrant Children's Journey to Europe

In November and December 2020, IOM interviewed 601 migrants and refugees who arrived by sea in Italy and Spain.⁹ Of these, more than half (52%) were adolescents and young adults between 14 and 24 years of age. In particular, of the 68 interviews with children 14 to 17 years old, 64 were conducted in Italy and only four in Spain.

Socioeconomic Profile

All 68 child respondents self-identified as boys. Some 42 of the children (62%) were 17 years old at the time of the survey, while 24 were 16 years old, one was 15 years old and one was 14 years old.

Of the children interviewed, 46% (31) originated from countries in West Africa, followed by South Asia (16), North Africa (12) and the East and Horn of Africa (9). Of the 16 countries of origin reported, the top five included Guinea (11, all from the Conakry capital region), Pakistan (9, all from Punjab), Eritrea¹⁰ (8, mostly from the Gash Barka and Debub regions), Bangladesh (7, from the Dhaka capital region) and Sudan (6, from South and Eastern Darfur). Five of the six children from Sudan reported to have been internally displaced for one to four years prior to leaving the country.

Almost half (32) of the respondents reported to have completed their primary education, while another 16 reported to have finished lower secondary education and three to have finished high school. Meanwhile, one fifth of the respondents (14) reported to have never gone to school and three children to have attended a religious school. Some 47% reported to have left school more than two years prior to the interview.

Many respondents reported to be employed or self-employed (31), while others reported to be studying (14) before departure. The remaining 23 reported that they were not employed or in education at the time of leaving their country of origin.

Journey

Most children reported to have travelled alone (87%), while seven travelled with a group of non-family members, and only two with one family member (one sibling and one uncle). Some 37% reported to have spent more than one year in Libya (2-3 years on average) before crossing the Central Mediterranean. Most respondents reached Italy after departing from Libya (75% or 51), while others reached Italy by sea from Turkey or Greece (9) or from Tunisia (4). The remaining four arrived in Spain after departing from Morocco or Senegal.

Reasons and Intentions

Some 43% of children (29) interviewed cited economic reasons as the primary motivation for leaving their country of origin, followed by limited access to basic services (15), being subject to or threatened with personal violence: (13), and the presence of conflict or war (11). Among the reasons related to safety and security, children mentioned violent family disputes as well as the lack of freedom of expression or democracy.

At the time of departing from their countries of origin, the most common intended destinations were Italy (32%), Europe in general (32%), Libya (12%), Spain (4%) and Turkey (3%). However, the most common final intended destinations at the time of the interview were Italy or Spain (62% combined or 42 respondents overall), followed by other European countries (mainly France, Germany and the United Kingdom).

Among their most pressing needs at the time of the interview, the children reported clothes (46%), legal assistance (19%), ability to contact family (7%), and medical and psychosocial support (7%).

Source: IOM's DTM Europe — Flow Monitoring Surveys in Italy and Spain (2020)

Asylum Applications and Decisions

In 2020, European countries¹¹ reported that 428,945 new asylum-seekers (first-time applicants) applied for international protection. Nearly one-third of them (134,800) were children, 32% fewer than in 2019 (198,950). In 2020, asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied children lodged 13,550 applications in the EU, 4% fewer than in 2019 (14,115).

The **Syrian Arab Republic** remained the main country of origin of asylum-seeking children (24%), followed by **Afghanistan** (14%), **Iraq** (6%), **Venezuela**, **Colombia** and **Eritrea** (4% each). Some 46% of all asylum-seeking children were girls.

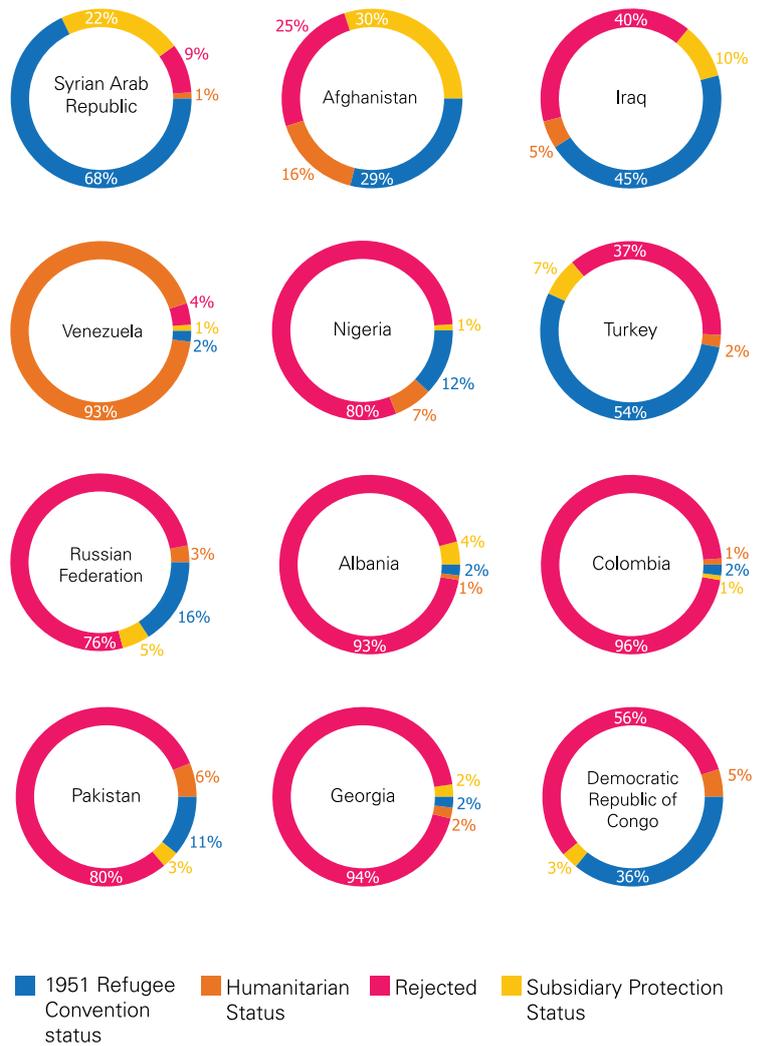
Germany, France, Spain and Greece recorded the largest numbers of asylum applications from children, and received two-thirds of all first-time child asylum applicants in Europe. **Germany** recorded 41% of all child asylum applications in 2020 (55,315), followed by **France** (19,700, or 15%), **Spain** (15,485, or 11%) and **Greece** (10,665, or 8%).

In 2020, national authorities across the EU issued **94,530** first instance decisions on child asylum applications. Of these, 59% were positive decisions, the same percentage as in 2019. Germany issued the most positive decisions granting refugee status and subsidiary protection to Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan children. Meanwhile, Spain issued the majority of decisions granting humanitarian status to Venezuelan children.

Though refugee and subsidiary protection status are defined by EU law, humanitarian reasons are specific to national legislation and not applicable in all Member States. Of all children who received a positive decision, **63%** were granted **refugee status** (67% in 2019), 20% subsidiary protection (19% in 2019) and 17% humanitarian status (14% in 2019).

Among the top countries of origin, the share of negative decisions was notably higher for children from Colombia (90%), Albania (93%), Pakistan (80%), Nigeria (80%), the Islamic Republic of Iran (56%) and Iraq (40%). Some 41% of all first-time asylum-seeking children who applied for international protection were rejected.

Decisions on Child Asylum Applications between January and December 2020

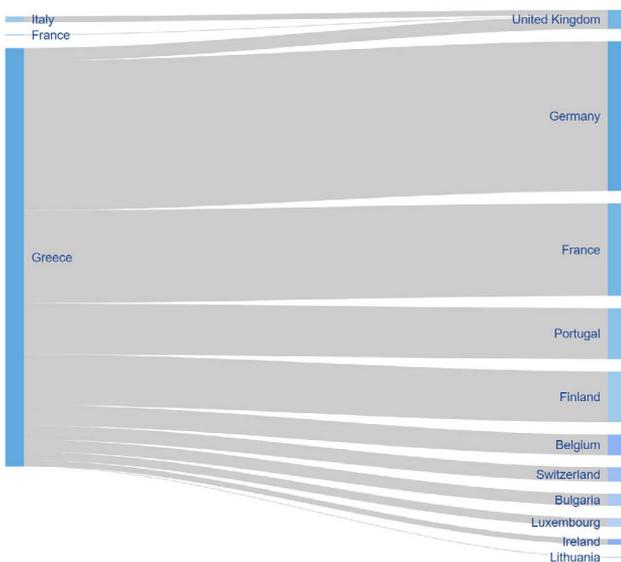


Relocation

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, relocation has remained an important means of supporting vulnerable people, including UASC, and enhancing solidarity among States, with some 3,063 beneficiaries assisted through relocation from Greece, Italy and Malta to 14 European countries in 2020.

IOM, together with involved governments and partner agencies UNHCR, UNICEF and EASO, coordinated regional relocation projects, namely RELITA (Italy) and REMA (Malta). In 2020, a notable achievement was the implementation of the Voluntary Relocation from Greece, with support from EMAS (European Commission emergency funding), which allowed for more harmonized procedures and resulted in the relocation of 574 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in precarious conditions. The initiative was led by the Government of Greece with the support of participating capitalize States, EASO, IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF and key protection partners such as METAdrasi and PRAKSIS. EASO and UNHCR supported best interest procedures of each child prior to relocation; IOM provided support through pre-departure health activities and orientation sessions, movement management and pre-departure accommodation in Greece.

Some **1,601 children (1,094 boys and 507 girls)** were relocated from Greece, Italy and Malta to other European countries in 2020. This included **574 UASC**, who were relocated from Greece to Germany (212), France (131), Portugal (72), Finland (72), Belgium (29), Switzerland (20), Bulgaria (17), Ireland, Luxembourg and Lithuania under different relocation programmes. In addition, 19 UASC were relocated to the United Kingdom from Greece, Italy and France under the DUBS scheme.¹²



Returns from Greece to Turkey

Of all persons returned from Greece to Turkey under the EU-Turkey Statement between 2016 and 2020 (2,140), 5% were children. All were returned with their families.

Source: [Returns from Greece to Turkey](#)

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) of Children and UASC

Overall, 16,650 beneficiaries were assisted in returning from European Economic Area (EEA) countries, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. Of these, 34% (5,723) were assisted in returning from Germany alone, and about 20% (3,309) were children, including 56 UASC. Of all beneficiaries assisted in returning from the EEA, the United Kingdom and Switzerland, around 41% (6,908) returned to countries in South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia; 22% (3,679) to Asia and the Pacific; 13% (2,153) to the Middle East and North Africa, just over 12% (2,056) to South America and the rest, nearly 12% (1,854), to other regions. Among the **3,309 children assisted** in returning from the EEA region, their main countries of nationality were Brazil (10%), Iraq (10%), Georgia (7%), the Republic of Moldova (7%) and the Russian Federation (7%).

Source: [Movements in 2020](#)

Source: [Relocation in 2020](#)

Children Resettled in Europe

Of the 21,700 people in resettlement procedures in Europe in 2020, 52% were children (28% boys and 24% girls). Sweden, France, Norway, Germany, the United Kingdom and Finland were the main countries in Europe considering children's resettlement cases. Syrians, Congolese (Democratic Republic of Congo), Sudanese and Eritreans were the most common nationalities of children whose cases were being considered for resettlement by European States.



Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted society's most at-risk people, including asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children. Temporary suspensions of registration, age assessment and asylum procedures have hindered children's access to services, including guardianship, as well as appropriate shelter in some contexts. Family reunification has been delayed due to the suspension of asylum procedures, consular services in third countries, and with limited flight options to facilitate transfers. Physical distancing and confinement measures have exacerbated existing challenges related to individual oversight and case management, effective information provision to children as well as support for caregivers and parents. Access to education has been a challenge particularly in reception facilities, as refugee and migrant children may not have the same levels of connectivity for online learning, and with crowded reception conditions being far less conducive to learning than school environments. Integration may also have been hindered as regular interaction in schools and with host community children and teachers has been disrupted. Overall, heightened risk factors such as increased poverty and food insecurity, limited access to education, and disruptions to social support networks and services have had a detrimental effect on children's mental health and psychosocial well-being. They have also exacerbated risks of violence, abuse, trafficking and exploitation faced by children, both while travelling and once arrived in Europe unaccompanied and with families. Support mechanisms for victims of trafficking have also been impacted, and there are preliminary findings in relation to an increase in online searches for child sexual abuse material (including child pornography).

Positive practice:

- In France, self-declared minority was accepted to facilitate access to child protection services while age assessment procedures remained suspended.
- In several countries, remote case management for children continued while confinement measures prevented in-person support and visits.
- Authorities in several countries extended the validity of residence permits, including for unaccompanied children and asylum-seekers, previously due to expire in the first half of 2020, as access to police and administration offices was delayed due to COVID-19-related measures.
- The child-friendly "My Hero is You" storybook was developed by the IASC MHPSS reference group and translated into several languages, providing information for children on COVID-19.
- In Bulgaria, the child protection agency set up a hotline providing COVID-19-related advice and information for parents and children.
- National tracing mechanism for unaccompanied children in Greece included a hotline, which resulted in many children self-reporting and seeking help in relation to COVID-19.
- In Albania, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection issued an instruction regarding child protection during the COVID-19 emergency. It defines the role of various State actors and includes persons of concern (including unaccompanied and separated children) within its categories of beneficiaries.
- In Serbia, UNHCR partners – the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Crisis Response and Policy Center (CRPC) – trained UASC Peer Educators on COVID-19 protective measures.



Definitions:

"**Separated children** are children (...) who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary care-giver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members." [\[source\]](#)

"**Unaccompanied children** (also called unaccompanied minors) are children (...) 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." [\[source\]](#)

A "refugee" is a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (Article 1 A 1951 Refugee Convention).

An "**asylum-seeker**" is a person who has applied for asylum and is awaiting a decision as to whether they are a refugee. Determination of refugee status can only be of a declaratory nature. Indeed, any person is a refugee within the framework of a given instrument if they meet the criteria of the refugee definition in that instrument, whether they are formally recognized as a refugee or not (UNHCR Note on Determination of Refugee Status under International Instruments). [\[source\]](#)

A "**migrant**" refers to any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from their habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is. [\[source\]](#)

About the factsheet

This factsheet is jointly produced by UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM with the aim to support evidence-based decision-making and advocacy on issues related to refugee and migrant children.

The document provides an overview of the situation in Europe with regards to refugee and migrant children (accompanied and UASC). It compiles key child-related data based on available official sources: arrival, asylum applications, asylum decisions, profiling of arrivals, relocation from Greece and Italy under the EU relocation scheme, as well as returns from Greece to Turkey under the EU-Turkey statement.

The present factsheet covers the period January to December 2020. The factsheet is produced every six months to provide up-to-date information on refugee and migrant children, including unaccompanied and separated children.

Endnotes

1. Data on arrivals is partial due to the large scale of irregular movements. It reflects both sea and land arrivals in Greece, and sea arrivals in Cyprus, Italy, Malta and Spain. Data for Spain is based on the Ministry of Interior statistics and UNHCR estimates.
2. Separated children are children 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. Unaccompanied children are children 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 (IASC).
3. Arrival figures for Greece are collected in the framework of UNHCR border activities and are provided by the Hellenic Police.
4. During the same period of time, 1,292 referrals were made to the Greek National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA) based on children identified on the Greek islands and mainland, including near the land border with Turkey in January-December 2020.
5. UNHCR estimated figures pending provision of final figures by the Spanish Ministry of Interior (MOI); figures on UASC arrivals in Ceuta and Melilla are not included. Children arriving in the Canary Islands from Western Africa through the Atlantic are included. [Data on children arriving in Spain in 2020 is taken from the Spanish Ombudsman Annual report 2020.](#)
6. Data on arrivals and demographics of refugees and migrants registered in Italy is based on information received from the Italian Ministry of Interior.
7. Statistics for Bulgaria are collected by the State Agency for Refugees. Observations on data and trends that are not typically compiled by government institutions are collected by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.
8. Estimate on data provided by the Immigration Police and the Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement (MHSE), Malta. UASC figures are based on age declared by the refugees and migrants upon arrival. Not all persons who make such a declaration are recognized to be UASC by the authorities after the age assessment is completed.
9. IOM's DTM Flow Monitoring Surveys were carried out in only two countries in the region and for two months only in 2020 due to mobility restrictions and accessibility of field for the data collection after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.
10. Information on nationalities is self-reported by respondents to the survey.
11. European Union Member States plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.
12. The "DUBS" project (Transfers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children from France, Greece and Italy to the United Kingdom) is a UK Home Office-funded project implemented by IOM UK in coordination with IOM missions in France, Greece and Italy, between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2021.

Limitation of available data on Children and UASC

There is no comprehensive data on arrivals (both adults and children) in Europe, especially by land and air, as such movements are largely irregular and involve smuggling networks, which are difficult to track. If collected, data is rarely disaggregated by nationality, risk category, gender or age. Reliable data on the number of UASC either arriving or currently residing in different European countries is often unavailable. The number of asylum applications filed by UASC is used to provide an indication of trends but does not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the caseload due to backlogs in national asylum systems, onward irregular movements or children not applying for asylum at all. In addition, due to different definitions and national procedures and practices, collecting accurate data on separated children specifically is challenging (e.g. separated children being registered as either accompanied or unaccompanied). It should also be noted that data for the period January to December 2020 on UASC asylum applications were not available or final for all EU Member States on the Eurostat website at the time this factsheet was released.

Jointly compiled and produced by:



For further information or any questions concerning this factsheet, please contact:

UNHCR:
Javed Khan
khanjav@unhcr.org

UNICEF:
Siraj Mahmudlu
smahmudlu@unicef.org

IOM:
Ivona Zakoska Todorovska
dtmmediterranean@iom.int