

Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Europe



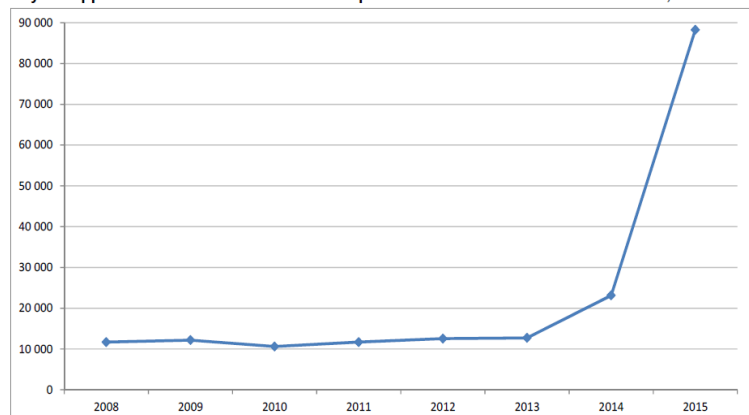
This update has been compiled by UNHCR to provide a summary of the existing information on UASCs arriving in Europe as of 13 June 2016. It includes information from UNHCR and partner operations in the field and statistical reports in the public domain.

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Statistics and Trends ¹

- **Ratio of children:** The ratio of children arriving to Europe has steadily increased since June 2015. Since October 2015 more than 30% of sea arrivals in Europe are children. For some nationalities, such as Afghans, children are already the largest population group.
- **Available data:** Unfortunately, reliable data on the number of UASC currently residing in different countries throughout Europe is unavailable. The number of asylum applications filed by UASC can provide an indication, but does not necessarily reflect an accurate picture of the geographic dispersion of cases, considering the backlog in registering asylum applications in some countries and onward movement after applying for asylum.
- **Asylum applications in Europe:** Around **90,000 unaccompanied children lodged asylum applications in European Union (EU) Member States in 2015**. In total, in the EU, unaccompanied children accounted for almost a

Asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors in the EU Member States*, 2008-2015



* excluding Croatia for the period 2008-2011

Source: Eurostats

quarter (23%) of all asylum applicants aged less than 18 in 2015. The percentage of asylum claims filed by unaccompanied children in the EU is expected to increase in 2016 as backlogs in Sweden and Germany will be cleared.

- **A few destination countries:** In 2015, the highest number of asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied children was registered in **Sweden (40% of all those registered in the EU Member States)**, followed by Germany (16%), Hungary (10%) and Austria (9%). A profiling exercise done by UNHCR in Sweden revealed that UASC chose Sweden to apply for asylum as they

¹ All figures in this document are from the relevant government authorities as reported by Eurostat or UNHCR offices.

perceived it offers good education opportunities (41% of interviewed UASC), to have good human rights standards (32%), and a fair and efficient asylum procedure (29%), as well as economic opportunities.

- **High numbers of UASC continue to arrive:** While arrivals of refugees and migrants to Greece in 2016 remains low, the number of unaccompanied children taking the perilous Central Mediterranean crossing more than doubled to over 7,000 UASC in the first five months of 2016, as compared to the same period in 2015. Unaccompanied children made up over 90% of the 7,567 children who crossed by sea to Italy between January 1 and May 31, 2016.²
- **Relocation of UASC:** As of 15 June 2016, 29 unaccompanied minors have been relocated from Greece to other EU member states, mainly to Finland. An additional 126 cases have been registered in Greece and are pending.

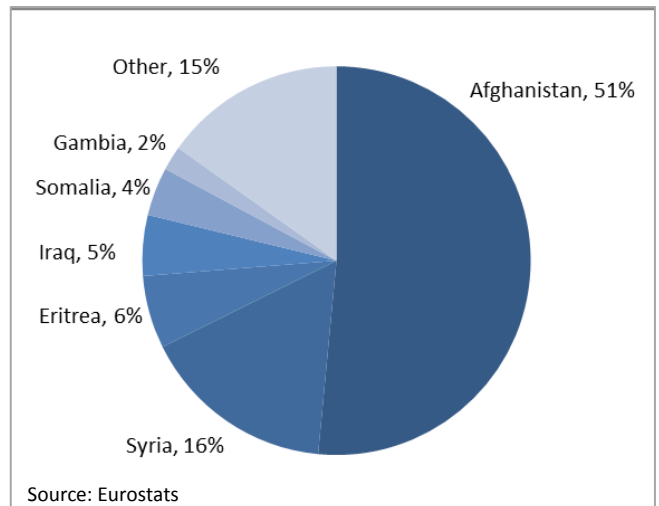
Profile

- **Nationality:** Around half (51%) of asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied children in the EU in 2015 were Afghans, followed by Syrians (16%), Eritreans (6%), and Iraqis (5%). However, in 2016, the largest group of UASC arriving through the Central Mediterranean route have Egyptian citizenship (mainly from the Governorate of Mansoura).
- **Gender and Age:** In 2015, the vast majority of asylum applications from UASC were lodged by boys (91%) between the age of 13 and 17. Profiling exercises and focus group discussions revealed that they are typically a younger of several siblings in the family, and are rarely the eldest.
- **Profile of Afghan UASC:** UNHCR conducted a comprehensive profiling exercise of Afghan UASC in Sweden to establish more detailed, concrete information on the largest population of UASC in Europe. The main findings linked to their background were (the detailed report forthcoming):
 - o **Education and work:** The majority of those surveyed had completed primary school, while two thirds reported they had worked for an average of ten months in the past year, which had prevented them from attending school.
 - o **Family background:** Most of the Afghan UASC interviewed lived with their nuclear family prior to embarking on their journey. However, those interviewed often reported that their parents, or habitual care-givers were missing. For example, half of the UASC participants reported that their father

was deceased, and one quarter of those surveyed noted that their mother was either deceased or her location unknown.

- o **Reasons for leaving:** Overall, Afghan UASC provided reasons related to their physical safety and protection for their departure from their countries of habitual residence, irrespective of a the country (Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan). While UASC leaving Afghanistan primarily stated security-related reasons for embarking on the journey, including conflict and violence, UASC departing from Iran mainly referenced discrimination, lack of access to rights, and lack of documentation as their primary motivation for leaving. Economic reasons were only mentioned by a small fraction (9%) of UASC interviewed.

UASC Asylum applicants by country of citizenship, 2015



Protection risks

- **Detention:** UASC continue to be detained in several countries in Europe, and, in a number of cases, are detained together with adults. The detention of UASC together with unrelated adults is often declared as a form of protective custody by authorities, though it exposes the children to serious protection risks and psychological distress.
- **(Sexual) violence and abuse:** Refugee and migrant UASC arriving in Europe are at heightened risk of violence and abuse, including sexual violence, especially in overcrowded and exposed reception facilities, and other locations used as temporary shelter by refugee and migrant populations, including parks, train stations, bus stations and roadsides. Increasing frustration and anger among these groups in emergency reception centres, sometimes operated as closed facilities, adds to the security risks. The reception conditions in many countries in Europe are dire and do not provide safe

² IOM

accommodation or access to services. UNHCR and partners have received increasing reports of boys and girls being harassed, suffering instances of violence, including SGBV, and/or abused in reception centres.

- **Smuggling, trafficking and (sexual) exploitation:** Over 2/3 of Afghan UASC interviewed in Sweden stated that they came with a “guide”. Surveys and focus group discussions have further illustrated that UASC rely heavily on information from smugglers and are thus at risk for manipulation, abuse and trafficking. UASC may also find it more difficult to navigate and organize onward travel, increasing vulnerability to exploitation by adults. During the focus group discussions in Sweden, all Afghan UASC reported similar risk factors, including dangerous means of transportation, sexual abuse and exploitation, detention (often with adults), deprivation of food and water, and being beaten by smugglers or even by police and/or border officers. UNHCR and partners have also received increasing reports of UASC engaging in survival sex practices, to sustain their living and to pay for potential onward movement.
- **Psychological distress:** Nearly all UASC interviewed in various UNHCR-led surveys reported acute distress, and that they had experienced or witnessed severe protection incidents along the route, including death of fellow travellers as well as a long and exhausting journey, mainly facilitated by smugglers. In addition, prolonged separation from family and caregivers can be distressing. Navigating hazards and obstacles on their journey without a trusted adult places additional stress on children who have likely already lived the traumatic experiences, including conflict and the sea crossing.
- **New family separations:** A major concern is that children have been separated from their parents or caregivers while travelling through Europe, especially as a result of chaotic conditions at border crossings, in reception areas or at transit points such as train stations. The border closure in March 2016 along the so called “Balkan route” significantly changed the circumstances of transit, but children are still being separated from their families while in transit. In addition, separated children detected by authorities travelling together with relatives are often removed from their relatives’ care, as national legal frameworks considered them as unaccompanied due to narrow definition of family, and forcing them into separate care arrangements.
- **Education and recreational activities:** UNHCR’s profiling exercise in Sweden demonstrated that UASC undertake long journeys, leaving them without access to formal or even informal education for several years. In addition, during travel, boys and girls focus on

their journey and rarely have opportunities to engage in recreational activities. Both the lack of education and recreation causes distress and harms their future prospects and stability.

- **Financial dependency:** UASC reported that the journey was primarily financed through borrowed money, which implies UASC may be required to pay back these funds, and may also indicate high expectations from the families of UASC with regard to financial support in the future. Distress and anxiety related to these expectations were mentioned by UASC in several UNHCR-led surveys, particularly by member of the Afghan community. However, only a small number of Afghan UASC interviewed in Sweden indicated that they had sent money back to Afghanistan or Iran.



Children and Family Support Hub/ Blue Dot established with partners in an emergency reception site.

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Response by UNHCR and partners

- **Protection and detention monitoring:** UNHCR and partners regularly monitor the situation and protection risks children face in key countries as part of UNHCR's mandate and response. This also includes regular detention monitoring.
- **Alternative care arrangements and alternatives to detention:** UNHCR invests heavily in the implementation of appropriate alternative care arrangements for UASC, determined to be one of the most prevalent gaps. As part of this process, UNHCR and partners actively promote and develop alternatives to detention for UASC in key countries in the Europe emergency response.
- **Service provision:** UNHCR, as part of its emergency response in Europe, is identifying and referring children at risk to appropriate service providers, providing legal counselling and information on options, running child friendly spaces, and if possible, provides safe accommodation for unaccompanied boys and girls together with partner organizations.
- **Children and Family Support Hubs/ Blue Dots:** UNHCR has, together with UNICEF, ICRC, and different international and local partners, developed and implemented the Blue Dot Project along the Eastern Mediterranean Route. Blue Dots assemble a minimum set of services in close physical proximity, including restoring family links, child friendly spaces, psychosocial support, legal counselling, safe spaces to sleep for women and children, and an information desk providing information on available services as well as the different options and risks under one neutral logo (a blue dot). They do not replace existing services but build on them as the services are provided together with local partners. The Blue Dots also served as informal coordination mechanism on site level, bringing together the different local partners and systematizing the identification and service provision mechanisms for example through agreed SOPs.
- **Advocacy:** UNHCR is continually advocating for child protection standards as well as strengthened legal pathways to Europe, especially for children at risk at all levels, national and regional. This includes prioritization of children at risk for relocation as well as expedited processing of family reunification.
- **Capacity building:** UNHCR and partners build child protection capacity at the local and national level, providing resources, but also training to different actors working with children in the scope of the emergency.
- **Best interest:** UNHCR and partners advocate for, monitor, and ensure that decisions on behalf of an unaccompanied child are based on an assessment of their best interest. Ultimately, UNHCR works towards building capacities to ensure that proper Best Interest Determination process are available in all countries affected by this emergency.
- **Participation:** UNHCR continues to conduct participatory assessments, including focus group discussions with UASC, to ensure that their views and opinions are taken into account by

local authorities, UNHCR, and other actors when developing their response.

- **Data:** UNHCR continues to conduct several surveys and profiling exercises of UASC to increase the information base of the different boys and girls, their background, their family situation, their experiences during the journey, and their situation in the receiving countries.

Remaining challenges and gaps in response for children arriving in Europe

- **National systems:** Many national systems in Europe experienced difficulties coping with the unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied and separated boys and girls arriving in Europe. This has frequently led to poor reception conditions, as well as major gaps in the provision of appropriate care arrangements. Foster care systems, often the best possible care arrangement, are largely overstretched in all countries.
- **Identification:** The identification and assessment of unaccompanied and separated children remains challenging. Children who are unaccompanied often try to thwart detection by authorities and service providers to continue their onward movement.
- **Legal pathways:** Access to existing legal pathways is complex, and solutions can be long in the making, as procedures can take several months, sometimes years. This includes family reunification and relocation from Greece, which take 6 months, even if UASC are prioritized for processing.
- **Best interest assessment and determination:** The profiling of Afghan UASC in Sweden has revealed that around 90% of UASC have not been through a Best Interest Assessment (BIA) process until they reached Sweden. Best interest determinations are not systematically implemented by national actors, often due to a lack of capacity.
- **Case management:** Regional case management systems are not yet functional, leading to a loss of information on individual

cases. This is hindering an effective provision of services across countries and also finding of a durable solution in the best interest of the children. UNHCR has discovered that the registration data on UASC is often inaccurate also leading to a lack of control and thus ability of monitoring of condition of the individuals.

- **Access to qualified independent representation:** The legal guardianship systems in receiving countries are overloaded. This can lead to legal guardians representing up to 75 UASCs, seriously challenging the efficacy and need for qualified and appropriate representation. This is particularly worrying, considering that legal guardians take key decisions on behalf of the boys and girls, determining their immediate but also long-term future.
- **Participation of children:** Children are not systematically included in general programme planning and implementation. Only very few local authorities regularly conduct participatory assessments asking boys and girls for their views and opinions.
- **Family tracing:** Countries in Europe do not engage sufficiently in the tracing of relatives of UASC. A reflection is needed at the European level to examine what standards of tracing (length, means, partners, reasonableness) must be pursued and what degree of cooperation may be sought from children and their appointed guardians.
- **Data and information:** Appropriate programming requires a thorough understanding of the background of the UASC and the risks they face. However, there is still insufficient information available to NGOs, international organisations, and local authorities. UASCs are also reluctant to share any data which relates to the smugglers as they continue to fear the influence of these individuals on their families. This often hinders programming created to mitigate risks linked to smuggling.