

A Brief Look at the Unaccompanied Youth of Europe

Who is an unaccompanied child?

The *Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum*, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Geneva, February 1997 (pg. 1) defines an unaccompanied child as “An unaccompanied child is a person who is under the age of eighteen, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is, attained earlier and who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so.”

Because terminology changes over time and varies across organisations and geographies, for the purposes of the work of the Mobilised for Unaccompanied Minors (M.U.M.) Network, we use the terms unaccompanied refugee children and youth, unaccompanied minors (UAM), UASC (an acronym used both for "unaccompanied asylum-seeking children" and "unaccompanied and separated children"), and unaccompanied youth all interchangeably.

We must be cautious however in our use of terms vs. labels. We are talking about children and youth who are without an adult family member at this time. We must not allow their status as an unaccompanied child to become their identity. Instead we allow it to be an indicator to us of a level of need that may exist in this season. While these children are in the process of seeking asylum and are traveling alone, they are highly vulnerable to predators, traffickers, smugglers and radical extremists. It is also likely that they currently are without the material resources they need to have a healthy, safe, stable life and may be losing hope for their future.

Why are these children “on the move”?

According to the *High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, Children on the Move*, 28 November 2016 (pg. 6): “Studies show that armed conflict and violence are among the most frequent drivers of displacement of children, but children face many types of violations of their fundamental rights. The refugee definition therefore: ...must be interpreted in an age- and gender-sensitive manner, taking into account the particular motives for, and forms and manifestations of, persecution experienced by children. Persecution of kin; under-age recruitment; trafficking of children for prostitution; and sexual exploitation or subjection to female genital mutilation, are some of the child-

specific forms and manifestations of persecution... Child-specific forms of persecution are often interconnected with other factors, including the loss of parents to war or disease, acute poverty and food insecurity, and lack of educational and economic opportunity. The particular discrimination and barriers stateless children encounter make them especially vulnerable to forced displacement, trafficking and the worst forms of child labour.”

Why would parents send their children alone?

When children move alone it is often because the family can only afford to send one child, not necessarily the eldest, to seek protection elsewhere. This tendency may be bolstered by a “culture of migration” that has developed over time, backed by a strong diaspora, and sometimes by misconceptions about immigration and refugee policies of destination countries. Families have usually invested heavily in their child’s journey and for these children, failure is not an option; the responsibility to reach the intended country or region and to repay their family’s debt weighs heavily on them.

- High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, Children on the Move, 28 November 2016, pg. 6

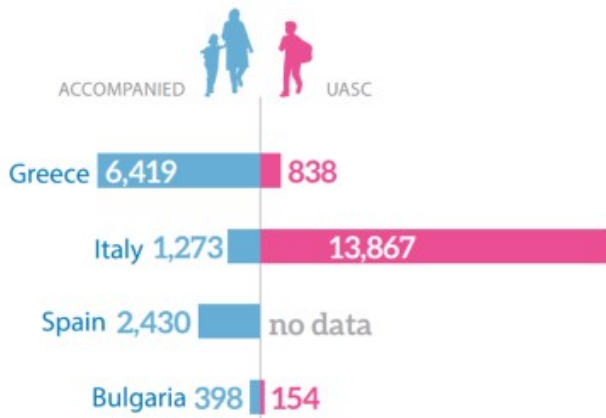
Children can also become separated from their parent(s) or suffer the death of their parent(s) during their forced displacement.

As borders close and people flows change, where are the children now?

The most recent data is from January through September of 2017. While the numbers of arrivals of asylum-seekers has decreased, the countries they arrive to are still also trying to manage the processing of and services for those who arrived in 2015 and 2016. This has created a challenge of over-filled shelters and slow processing time for asylum applications. As a result, many unaccompanied youth choose to try to exist outside of the system, which often puts them into increased danger of being trafficked or exposed to hazardous travel conditions. Additionally, for a variety of reasons, it is challenging to gather accurate data to assess their current situations across Europe.

This chart, from UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM's report: [Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe](#), shares some of what is known of new arrivals for January through September 2017:

Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children by Country of Arrival



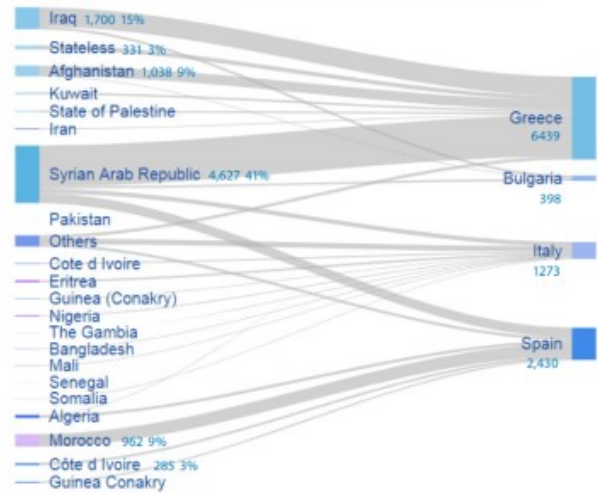
Source: Hellenic Police, EFGA, Italian Ministry of Interior, Bulgaria State Agency for Refugees, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Spanish Ministry of Interior.



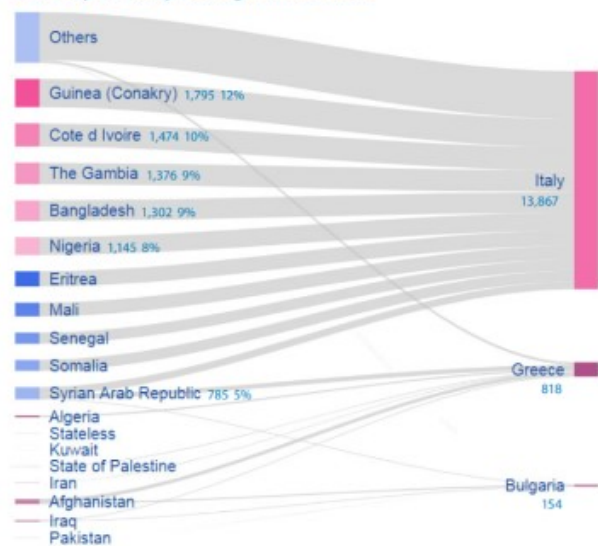
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Nationality of Accompanied and Unaccompanied and Separated Children by Country of Arrival

Accompanied Children by Country of Origin and Arrival



UASC by Country of Origin and Arrival



Why help unaccompanied refugee children & youth in Europe?

In 2015 and 2016 more than 170,000 children and youth arrived alone in Europe seeking asylum. Many traveled across the continent in attempts to reach the U.K., Germany and Nordic countries. Some have been held in the country they arrived in, others became stuck in transit due to border closings and a lack of coordination between countries to provide care and community or to reunify these children with family. In most cases, these youth have been without family for months or even years, are living in squalid conditions, are preyed upon by traffickers, smugglers and radical extremists, and exist in a state of limbo - not knowing how or when they will be welcomed into a caring, safe community or reunited with family.

This is an opportunity - and, more so, a call - for the Church to provide the covering of Christ through both actions and words.

Jesus said, **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”** (Matt 19:14)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: **“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”** (Matt 18:1-5)

How are churches helping?

Many churches and individual Christians across Europe are caring for these youth through mentorship programs, foster care, community outreach, educational initiatives, donation gathering and distribution, partnering with government agencies, visiting shelters where youth are housed, and speaking up for their needs and rights.

To learn more or join the Mobilised for Unaccompanied Minors (MUM) Network, visit www.refugeeconnect.com/Unaccompanied-Minors.