

Child migrants: How little we know

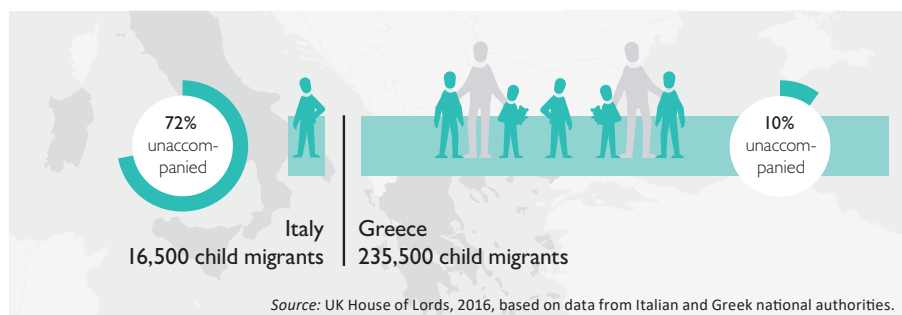
Key findings

- One-quarter of the million migrants arriving by sea to Italy and Greece in 2015 were children: 94 per cent of those (235,500) arrived in Greece, of whom 10 per cent were unaccompanied. Of the 16,500 children who arrived in Italy, 72 per cent were unaccompanied.
- The number of children applying for asylum in Europe in 2016 was 10 times the same number in 2008. Children who migrate – be it alone or with family members – but do not seek asylum are unlikely to appear in official statistics.
- Existing estimates suggest that the number of children who arrived in Europe unaccompanied and did not seek asylum in 2013 may have been as high as the number of those who did apply for protection.
- Data on child migrants are crucial to identify and address their needs, but currently present serious limitations: there are gaps related to child migrants moving irregularly, risks of double-counting across countries or local administrations, and differences in definitions and methodologies used for data collection across European Union Member States, which hamper comparability.
- An estimated 10,000 unaccompanied children were missing in the European Union after having applied for asylum in a European Union Member State in 2016. It is unclear how many of these children may have ended up being exploited, or may have left their assigned guardians or facilities to join relatives elsewhere or find employment.
- More detailed, accessible and disaggregated data on child migrants, their profiles, reasons and intentions are necessary to ensure their protection, access to services and the fulfilment of their best interest. An initiative is ongoing to include children in the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration and the global compact on refugees.

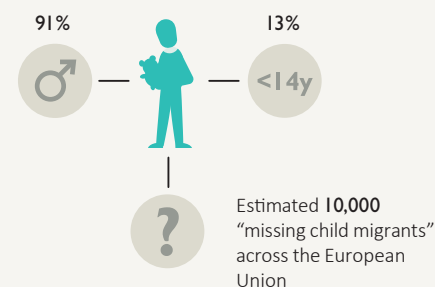
Child migrants: How little we know

Irregular sea arrivals of children to Europe

More than 250,000 children arrived by sea to Greece and Italy in 2015.



Unaccompanied children applying for asylum in the European Union, 2015



Child migrants include:

- Unaccompanied children, i.e. children arriving alone
- Separated children, i.e. children who arrive with non-family member adults
- Dependants, i.e. children arriving with adults

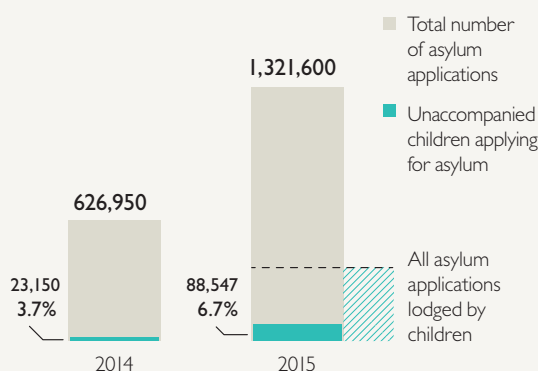
Applying for asylum in the European Union

12,775



12,770

In 2013, an estimated 12,770 children arrived unaccompanied in Europe and did not apply for asylum – almost equal to the number of children who arrived and applied for asylum (12,775).



The number of children seeking asylum in Europe increased tenfold between 2008 and 2016 (UNICEF, 2017). These children are part of the population of under-18-year-olds migrating to Europe for reasons ranging from accompanying parents headed to a new job to entering irregularly, and perhaps exploited by traffickers and invisible to the community. Few of those children who migrate but do not seek asylum are counted. Yet, strong data are essential for understanding the situation of child migrants and addressing their needs. Foremost among these is their need for protection as refugees and displaced persons, and above all, their needs as children.

UNICEF notes the severe limitations of data on migrant children (2017). Current data come from administrative records, census documents, registers and surveys. However, these are incomplete; often do not capture people whose movements are irregular, sometimes involve multiple reporting of the same individuals whether in one jurisdiction or several; and in the case of unaccompanied children, sometimes do not clearly identify them, in an effort to protect their identities. It is also difficult to obtain a clear regional European picture or a cross-country comparison, when definitions and methods of gathering information can differ widely. The only requirement for European Union countries is to provide data on unaccompanied children applying for protection (European Commission, 2010).

The United Kingdom House of Lords committee report on “Children in crisis” (2016:8) puts the situation starkly noting “the near unanimity among our witnesses that the data on unaccompanied migrant children in the EU were fragmented and poorly disaggregated”. This problem is compounded by, and contributes to double counting (House of Lords, 2016:60). Double counting occurs when local authorities collect data, and children are moved and counted in more than one municipality (Sigona and Humphris, 2017). Different organizations use different definitions and methods to count children. Therefore, there is no systematic collection of data that can then be usefully disaggregated to provide the evidence needed for coherent policymaking. Yet policies on migrant children are ones that will impact not only their young lives, but also the communities around them in Europe and the families they may have left behind, as these children grow into young adults, and economic actors in aging societies.

WHO ARE CHILD MIGRANTS?

Child migrants, as a distinct group with rights and needs that are not always covered by the categories of “child” or “migrant” alone, are all but invisible in data and in policy approaches. Attention is paid to two sub-groups, among them – “unaccompanied children” and “separated children”. Children arriving in Europe with adults, particularly if they arrive as a family, are often simply “dependants”, whose status and entitlements rest on the categories into which their parents or guardians fall. Those children arriving alone or accompanied by an adult who do not enter an asylum claim, or who do not enter European countries with a visa and regulated stay, seem to be invisible to data collection. For example, estimates for 2013 show that an approximately equal number of children arrived unaccompanied and did not apply for asylum (12,770) as arrived and applied for protection (12,775).¹ There are also claims of an estimated 10,000 “missing children” across the European Union who submitted asylum applications as unaccompanied children in a European Union Member State, but, according to Europol, cannot be found because they have left their assigned guardians or facilities (House of Lords, 2016:55). While the media and some non-governmental organizations conclude that these children are being exploited by criminal gangs, and some almost certainly are, researchers point out that some of them might simply be miscounted, have left State-appointed guardians to join extended family members of their choice, or tried find their own ways to make money to send home (Sigona and Allsopp, 2016). We simply do not know.

The issue of child migrants has been thrust into greater focus by the magnitude of their movement during 2015–2017. These children, “many of them unaccompanied by a parent, relative or guardian are in the forefront of [the refugee] crisis” (House of Lords, 2016:8).

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1 Estimate attributed to the European Council for Refugees and Exiles, in evidence from the European Commission, presented to the United Kingdom House of Lords committee, 2016.

SEPARATED CHILDREN

Children who arrive with non-family member adults are considered to be “separated children” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). Their needs can fall between the gaps: not being “unaccompanied”, it might be presumed that any adult with them will take care of them, yet those individuals might not be willing or able to do so. In fact, there are occasions on which the accompanying adult is a trafficker, for example, or an abusive relative from whom guardianship and good care cannot be anticipated. In other instances, siblings might travel together, but the age difference can mean that an older brother or sister is treated as a regular adult asylum seeker, while a younger sibling is assigned a guardian or special accommodation for unaccompanied children. By failing to clearly categorize children, States miss opportunities to assist them, establish the substance of their migration story and act in such a way that they accomplish what is in the best interest of the child.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights notes that of the 14 Member States studied in its 2016 thematic paper on separated children, “not one was able to provide official information on the number and profile of children arriving in Europe accompanied by an adult who is neither parent or guardian” (2016:3). While most Member States register unaccompanied children, none register children separated from their parents but arriving or travelling with another adult. Only Sweden gives a minor nod to the specific situation of those children travelling with adults, as children are registered as individuals who are part of a family group, rather than as family members or unaccompanied (ibid., 4).

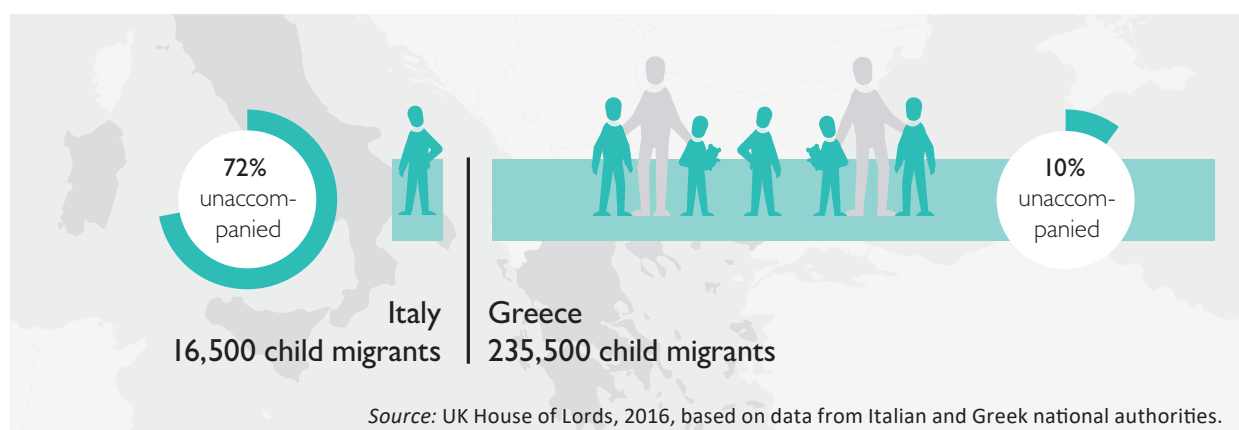
HOW CHILDREN ARRIVE: WHERE THEY COME FROM AND THE ROUTES THEY TAKE

Arrivals of unaccompanied and separated children, based on available data, differ depending on the migration route. Sigona and Humphris (2016) point out that approximately one quarter of the million migrants arriving by sea in Greece and Italy in 2015 were children. Of these children, 94 per cent arrived in Greece. Of those 235,500 children, about 10 per cent (or 23,550) were unaccompanied. Of the 16,500 children who arrived in Italy, 72 per cent (almost 12,000) were unaccompanied. Simona and Humphris’ analysis shows that children from Egypt and the Gambia almost always travelled alone, whereas the vast majority of Syrian children travelled with their families. Similarly, Afghan children, the second largest group by arrival in Greece, are much more likely to have travelled alone than Syrian children. The data tell us this much and gives rise to many questions: What makes the difference? Is it cultural? Does the fact that families of Syrians are travelling together say something about their protection needs? Is proximity the issue?

Existing data are relatively inaccessible because of fragmentation. One issue is that the definitions of “unaccompanied child” or “separated child” differ between Member States, largely because their policies towards these individuals are so different.

Irregular sea arrivals of children to Europe

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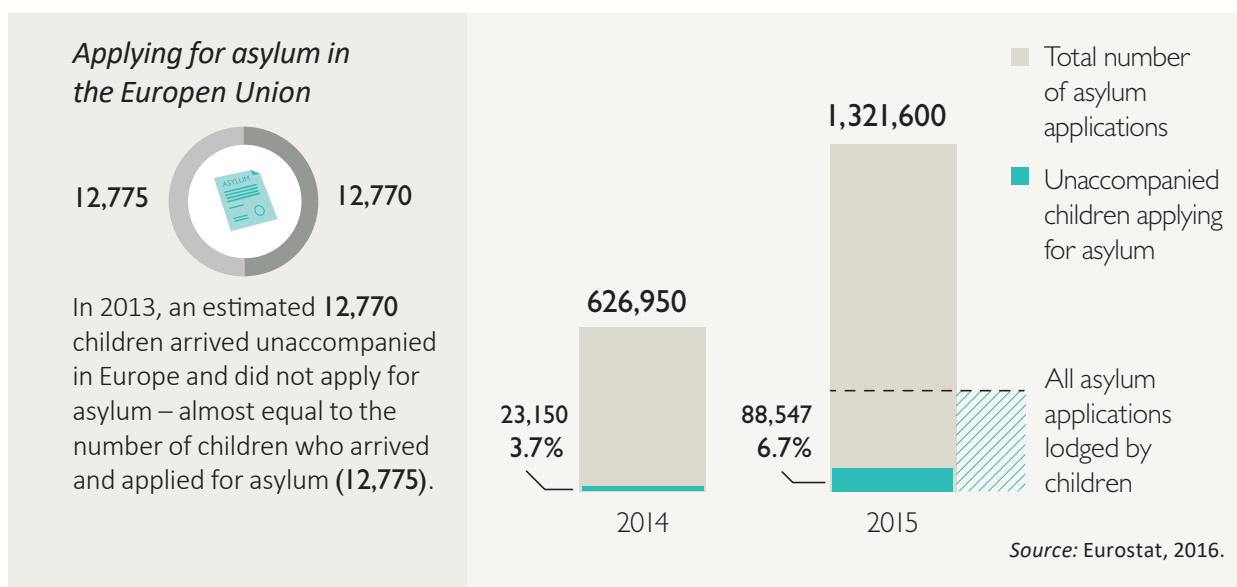
UNACCOMPANIED CHILD ASYLUM SEEKERS

Eurostat (2016) data for 2015 show some 88,265 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in the European Union. These made up 23 per cent of all asylum applications lodged by children that year, meaning that almost 300,000 asylum applications were received from children who entered the European Union as part of a family or accompanied by adults other than their parents (*ibid.*). Considering that 1,321,600 asylum applications were lodged in the European Union in 2015, applications from unaccompanied children constituted 6.7 per cent of the total (House of Lords, 2016). This was a significant rise over the previous year, when 23,150 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in the European Union (*ibid.*, 8), making up 3.7 per cent of the total (626,950).

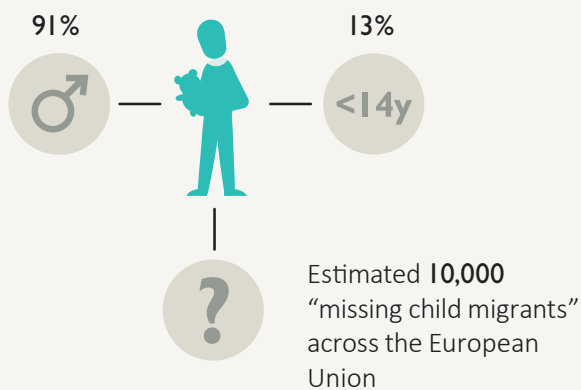
Eurostat (2016) uses a broad definition for unaccompanied children seeking protection, based on the definition used by the European Commission and in Council documents. Statistics show some anomalies, for example, there are significant outliers both in terms of gender and of age at the time of application, which give rise to questions about why particular Member States would show such different data/information, and also questions data collection and reporting.

According to a report by the European Migration Network (EMN) (2015:9), in 2014, 86 per cent of the unaccompanied children seeking asylum were boys, and 65 per cent of the total were aged 16–17. This means that a significant proportion of these unaccompanied children were approaching the age of majority, at which point the protections afforded to them, and the range of their rights and needs for support, education and guardianship, would change. For this reason, age testing becomes an important part of States' approach to unaccompanied children seeking asylum. This is carried out widely, although methods are discredited as imprecise if not inaccurate (House of Lords, 2016:16), and contributes to the broad view of a "culture of disbelief" that prevails in the handling of unaccompanied child asylum seekers in particular.

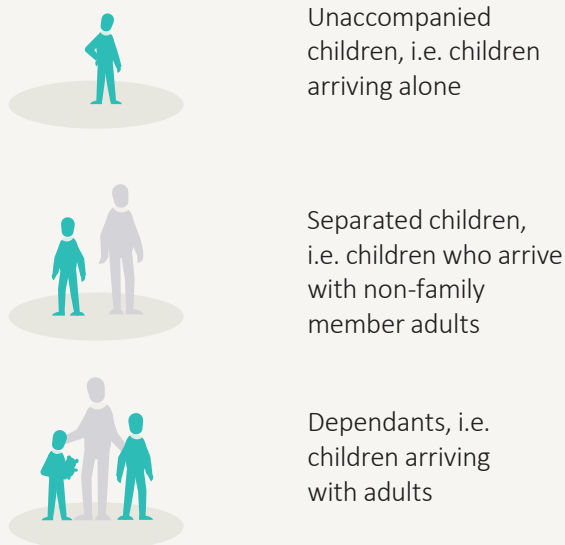
This data also demonstrates the difficulties of fragmentation, lack of disaggregation or changes in the way statistics are produced from year to year; for instance, it is hard to compare yearly data when one has data on how many under-14s request asylum one year, and how many unaccompanied children aged 16–17 the next.



Unaccompanied children applying for asylum in the European Union, 2015



Child migrants include:



WHY DO CHILDREN MIGRATE?

Robust data of not only the demographics of child migrants, but also their motives in moving would be useful in crafting policies targeted at the root causes of child migration, including the movement of unaccompanied children seeking asylum and separated children who are part of protection applications. The 2015 EMN report synthesizing national approaches to the movement of unaccompanied children notes that the motives for these children’s migration are often

unknown (2015:12). The two main motives appear to be security and economic or educational aspirations, but they can also include domestic violence, the recruitment of child soldiers and forced marriages. In addition, children arriving in a specific intended destination might be seeking extended family reunification, for example with cousins or aunts and uncles, or might be seeking to join a diaspora community. They could also be hoping to advance educational or economic aspirations that they believe can best be fulfilled in a particular place. However, there is little or no solid data on these intentions, so the debate, and therefore policies, targeting the movement of unaccompanied and separated children are based on presumptions or extrapolated hunches.

There is some concern that families might send an unaccompanied child ahead as an “anchor” to enable family reunification in the future. The United Kingdom limits family reunification for this reason – not allowing parents to rejoin children who arrived alone. However, there are no data to show how often a family may have engaged in this strategy, or whether children are simply sent first to seek safety and opportunities when resources will not allow a whole family to move. In fact, available evidence from European Union Member States following the family reunification directive and permitting such movements suggests that many children do not seek for families to join them, often out of concerns for the safety of those family members, particularly in terms of them being singled out by authorities prior to any potential departure (see House of Lords, 2016:20–21).

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

An initiative is underway to explicitly include children in the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration and the global compact on refugees, highlighting the need to respect their rights, ensure protection and access to services, and act in their best interests (Bhabha and Dottridge, 2017; Initiative for Child Rights, 2017). In order for those goals to be achieved, there is a need for more detailed, accessible and disaggregated data on child migrants, where they are coming from and intending to go, who they are with or why they are alone, and the reasons for their migration.

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About

GMDAC

In response to growing calls for better data on migration, and better use and presentation of migration data, IOM has created a Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC). Located in the heart of Berlin, Germany, the Centre aims to provide authoritative and timely analysis of data on global migration issues as a global hub for data and statistics on migration.

Data Briefing Series

The GMDAC Data Briefing Series aims to explain what lies behind the numbers and the data used in migration policy and public debates. The Briefings explain what “the numbers” indicate about movements of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, on a range of topics for policy across the globe.

The way data are presented has an important influence on public perceptions of migration in Europe and the development of policy. The series will serve to clarify, explain and exchange specialist knowledge in an accessible format for wider public and policy audiences, for capacity-building and evidence for policy. Briefings will be of interest to expert, as well as lay audiences, including journalists, students, local authority and city planners and lawyers.

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