

Europe Refugee Emergency - BRIEFING NOTE

Unaccompanied and separated children

This update has been compiled by UNHCR to provide a summary of the existing information on UASC arriving in Europe as of 09 October 2015. It includes information from UNHCR and partner operations in the field, from media and organisational reports in the public domain.

Overall trends: In the current situation where people are ‘on the move’, ensuring the identification of and support to unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) in accordance with their best interests is a particular challenge. In most countries, UASC are reluctant to be identified as such, as this would delay their onward movement. Some UASC state, for the same reason, that they are adults. The ‘top’ nationalities of UASC in Europe are Syrians, Afghans and Eritreans with significant variations between different transit countries. The majority of the UASC are boys between the age of 14 to 17 years, but there has been an increase in the percentage of girls.

Situation of UASC arriving in Europe

Numbers¹ and profile

- There are two different profiles of UASC, those who have started their journey as UASC and those who were separated from their families while traveling. While they are both extremely vulnerable and at risk, the first group generally know where they want to go and how to reach this destination, the others are very exposed considering that they were unprepared and are traumatized by their sudden separation.
- It is **difficult to report exact numbers of UASC**, as there are significant challenges in the accurate and comprehensive identification of UASC and currently many countries only register UASC who apply for asylum. While this update looks at both separated and unaccompanied children, disaggregated information (UAC vs. SC) is for the most part not available. Furthermore, given the high mobility of the population, it is also likely that some UASC are being registered in more than one country, while others pretend to be adults and are never identified as UASC. **The overall number of UASC is likely to be significantly higher in 2015 than in 2014, in line with the overall increase of arrivals in Europe, both in countries of “transit” and in countries of “destination”:**
 - Hungary, Serbia and FYROM report huge increases in the numbers of UASC registering with authorities compared with 2014 levels, including a more than tenfold increase in UASC applications in Hungary so far in 2015 (as of Aug 11). As of 22 September, FYROM has received 2,844 asylum applications from UASC – around 3% of total applications. In Italy and Greece, the numbers of UASC registered by authorities are actually lower compared to 2014. In Italy, this is in line with an overall decrease in registered arrivals compared to 2014, and specifically a decrease in Syrian arrivals; in Greece, however, it is likely that this decrease (both net and proportional) is due to the challenges of identifying and referring UASC to the relevant authorities, and the fact that many people, including UASC, try not to register and are moving onwards.
 - Germany has received 3,375 applications from UASC so far in 2015 (as of 31 Aug) compared to a total of 4,390 applications for all of 2014. In both countries, it is expected that these figures are lower than the real numbers. Austria registered 4,789 applications of UASC until end-July 2015 compared to only 867 during the same period in 2014 and 2,082 during the whole year 2014 – meaning that the figure for UASC asylum applications as a percentage of total applications has almost doubled, from 7% in 2014 to 13% so far in 2015.

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

- **UASC, like other arrivals, are mostly transiting through countries** such as Greece, Serbia, FYROM, Croatia and Hungary. In Greece, only 282 UASC have applied for asylum – 3.3% of the total applications so far this year. In FYROM, of the 2,250 UASC who have been registered, only 75 applied for asylum, and all of those are no longer in Macedonia.
- Most UASC are from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea, with **different countries reporting higher numbers of different nationalities**, which may suggest different routes or strategies for different populations of UASC. For example, Syrians are the most represented nationality for UASC in FYROM, Afghans are dominant in Serbia, Hungary and Germany, and Italy has seen the largest number of arrivals from Eritrea.
- **The majority of UASC are boys between 14 and 17, however some countries are also reporting an increase younger children and in girls.** In Serbia, 1,047 girls have been identified amongst UASC so far in 2015 as compared to 85 in 2014.

Protection risks

In addition to the risks to all children's health and wellbeing caused by the hazardous conditions of their journey through Europe, UASC may face heightened or additional risks, including:

- **Violence and abuse:** All children arriving in Europe are at heightened risk of violence and abuse, including sexual violence, especially in the over-crowded and exposed reception conditions in many locations, including parks, train stations, bus stations and roadsides. UASC can be particularly vulnerable as they lack the protection and care of an adult who is responsible for them. In some locations, even where specific reception facilities for UASC exist it has been difficult to ensure separation from adults due to numbers.
- **Detention:** There are reports of detention of UASC in some countries, including with adults. As of 16 September, 63 unaccompanied children were detained in Greece for example.
- **New 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. Some children have also been separated from caregivers during relocations.
- **Psychological distress:** Prolonged separation from family and caregivers can be distressing even for older children. Navigating the hazards and obstacles on their journey without a trusted adult places additional stress on children who have likely already lived the traumatic experiences of conflict and the sea crossing.
- **Smuggling and exploitation:** UASC may find it more difficult to navigate the procedures and processes for border crossings and asylum applications, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation by adults. The links between children and their smugglers need to be better understood as this will impact on what response strategies can be put in place, and to ensure that protection measures do not result in further risks for children, especially vis-à-vis smugglers.

Response for UASC arriving in Europe

In most countries, UNHCR and civil society organisations are focusing on preventing family separation, identifying UASC and providing information and assistance for UASC on asylum procedures, family reunification, accommodation and other areas of need, as well as referring them to appropriate authorities and agencies for accommodation and assistance according to their best interests. ICRC and National Red Cross Societies are providing assistance as well as [Restoring Family Links](#) services for UASC and other refugees and migrants. Governments and civil society organisations are working hard to scale up existing capacities to accommodate UASC, including expanding existing reception centres and housing UASC in facilities for other children at risk such as children's homes. However, in so-called 'transit' countries, children move on from such facilities quickly, leaving little time to assess their protection needs and provide assistance.

Challenges

- Most countries receiving refugees and migrants report that **the identification and assessment of UASC is extremely challenging** as most of the arrivals are not being registered at all. Given the

large numbers arriving, authorities are not able (and in some cases are not trained) to identify or assess UASC. Many children are also reportedly declaring themselves as over 18 in order to avoid being referred to the authorities, or are avoiding registration procedures entirely.

- **Reception facilities for UASC are overwhelmed** in many areas. In Germany, , where children are likely to stay longer, the high numbers of UASC in some areas have meant that some children are being housed in hotels or other temporary accommodation without sufficient protection and care in line with their best interests. Similarly, in Austria the shortage in adequate reception facilities has led to a situation where, as of end-September, 1,380 separated child asylum-seekers are accommodated in Austria’s largest reception centre in Traiskirchen where they receive inadequate care and some face inadequate reception conditions (accommodation in unheated tents). In both ‘transit’ and ‘destination’ countries, poor conditions mean that UASC do not receive timely information, care and support to connect with family.
- **Procedures for UASC are overwhelmed and are not well-adapted to high numbers and high mobility.** Many countries are therefore not able to assess children’s needs, make referrals, appoint guardians, conduct age assessments, or collect information for family reunification. In some countries, these procedures may also not have been fully developed even before the crisis – FYROM, for example, does not have an age assessment procedure. In Serbia, it has been noted that although UASC should be referred for social welfare assistance, referrals are often not being made.
- **Dublin family reunification procedures are lengthy:** Family members including UASC do not always receive information about the rights to family reunification and the specific criteria that apply under the Dublin III Regulation in time. Due to the long process most UASC are not willing to have the process initiated while they are on the move.

Field interventions – selected activities from European Countries

Across Europe States, UNHCR, NGOs and other actors are working to provide assistance and protection for UASC. All of the concerned countries already had programmes for UASC before the current crisis, which are still operating. The below is a selection of highlights of the response to the current influx in some countries as reported by UNHCR and partners, not a reflection of all activities or facilities for UASC nor does it reflect broader protection interventions related to reception of refugees and migrants more broadly.

GREECE

- UNHCR is providing technical support and assistance to the Greek authorities on identification and support for UASC, and on procedures for age assessment and the appointment of guardians.
- UNHCR has deployed protection teams to arrival points to support the identification and assistance of persons with specific needs, including UASC, along with local partners Praxis and ARSIS.
- UNHCR staff are also actively working to prevent and respond to family separation at entry and exit points, including by facilitating “on-the-spot” family reunifications when families are separated during chaotic transit times
- In Lesbos, the Hellenic Red Cross is providing Restoring Family Links services, and IRC, METAction and Save the Children are also assisting UASC in reception areas.

FYROM

- Legal assistance and psycho-social support are being provided.
- UNHCR, government, NGOs and international organizations are developing SOPs for support for unaccompanied and separated children.
- UNICEF supports the establishment of child friendly areas.
- UNHCR is working closely with the national authorities to improve capacity and processes for identification, processing and referral of unaccompanied and separated children.
- UNHCR is working to establish a Wi-Fi connection in Vinojug (Gevgelija) site and in Tabanovce as a tool for refugees and migrants, especially children, to re-establish and maintain family links.

SERBIA

- UNHCR and UNICEF are working with the Serbian authorities to organize an expert's meeting to define the problems, solutions, and resources needed to improve the response for UASC.
- A consultant is also being hired by UNICEF, working in partnership with UNHCR, to conduct an assessment of the child friendliness of the asylum procedures in the current influx situation.
- Terre des Hommes has established mobile teams in Serbia and Macedonia, providing emergency kits and information services.
- The Serbian Red Cross is conducting Restoring Family Links services at the borders with Hungary and Croatia.

HUNGARY

- UNHCR is providing technical support and capacity building for authorities and NGOs involved in working with UASC, especially in reception centres;
- A mobile group of social workers, legal advisors and volunteers funded by UNHCR provided support and advice to UASC arriving in Budapest and staying in train stations, bus stations and parks.
- The Cordelia Foundation is providing psycho-social support for UASC and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee is providing legal counselling and representation for UASC, with UNHCR support.

AUSTRIA

- UNHCR has enhanced its reception monitoring missions. During visits to the Traiskirchen reception facility, cases of particularly vulnerable UASC have been identified and subsequently referred to the authorities who have ensured better accommodation for those children.
- Cases of UASC separated from family members in the Dublin area have been referred to the authorities and/or UNHCR offices in other countries and family reunification could thus be facilitated.

ITALY

- UNHCR, government authorities and NGOs are developing SOPs for disembarkation, identification and onward referral of UASC to child protection services.
- A project for a 1st line reception centre for UASC coming to Italy is underway which has a capacity for 800 children at a time for 3 months, during which time they can rest, receive medical treatment, psycho-social support, and information about available options.
- Child friendly leaflets have been developed in a participatory approach with input from children themselves and reception centre staff.