Missing Unaccompanied Migrant Children

Definition of the Problem

Whilst Eurostat data regarding how many unaccompanied children applied for asylum in 2015 is not yet available, what we can be certain about is that the number of unaccompanied migrant children arriving in Europe has increased. In the first nine months of this year, 10,000 unaccompanied or separated children arrived in Italy and Malta alone. Between 19 June and 14 October, 5,632 unaccompanied migrant children were registered in Macedonia. However inconsistent data management prevents us from knowing the true numbers of unaccompanied children in the EU. Furthermore, many agencies report that there is no effective mechanism to identify unaccompanied and separated children and that the registration procedures for a child seeking asylum do not provide mechanisms to identify child victims of human trafficking, therefore increasing the risk to which these children are exposed.

What we do know is that the problem of missing unaccompanied migrant children has been a concern for several years.

- In Belgium, research undertaken by Child Focus recorded that unaccompanied children seeking asylum disappear in approximately 25% of the cases within the first 48 hours upon arrival. (See “Studie over het profiel en het traject van niet-begeleide minderjarige asielzoekers in ons land”, 2005)
- In the UK, the British Asylum Screening Unit reported that 60% of the unaccompanied minors accommodated in UK social care centres go missing and are not found again.
- In 2010 Terres des Hommes calculated that up to half of the unaccompanied migrant children vanish yearly from reception centres in Belgium, France, Spain and Switzerland, mainly in the first 48 hours after their admission to the centres.
- In Sweden, more than 800 minors have disappeared in the last 5 years. In 2014, 374 unaccompanied children went missing and only 59 have been tracked down reports Sweridge Radio. The situation seems even more worrying in 2015 when the coastal town of Trelleborg reported that 1,000 children from the 1,900 unaccompanied children who arrived in September had disappeared,
- In Italy, the CONNECT project reported that in 2013, 24% of registered unaccompanied migrant children went missing from reception centres and that many more go missing before registration. The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that in 2014, 3,707 unaccompanied migrant children of the 14,243 who were registered after arriving via boat went missing from reception centres. The Ministry of Welfare reported that in 2015, 62% of all unaccompanied migrant children who had arrived between January and May went missing.
- In Germany, a social worker from the German Red Cross in the region of Saxony-Anhalt reported in November 2015 that they witness daily disappearances of unaccompanied migrant children, often very young. Data is not available because no official state organisation is working on the issue except a few small NGOs.

Data collected from hotlines for missing children which operate in 29 countries through the 116 000 telephone number reveals that unaccompanied migrant children go missing from age 8 up to 17 years. Unaccompanied migrant children who go missing may be children who have already
applied for asylum or are wanting to apply for asylum in another EU Member State where they have family or where they believe that they could have a better future. Some unaccompanied children do not apply for protection either because they lack information, they are discouraged by the perceived length and complexity of the procedure, or because these children are approached by criminal networks looking to exploit them for profit.

When children go missing in one country, regardless of the reason, the system has failed to ensure them protection. For many of these children, the journey into exploitation and suffering does not end once they arrive on EU shores. As reported by Europol’s chief of staff recently, there is a tremendous amount of crossover between those smuggling refugees across borders and gangs ensnaring people for exploitation in the sex trade or as forced labor. Victims for exploitation are “especially those of a young age, young women, the unaccompanied”.

Despite the enormous risks to which unaccompanied migrant children are exposed, their disappearance is usually underreported. This is demonstrated by the fact that disappearances of unaccompanied migrant children makes up only 1% of the caseload reported by 116 000 hotlines in 2015. The results of the project SUMMIT, described below, confirm this. Furthermore, according to the 2013 EC study Missing children in the European Union Mapping, Data Collection and Statistics¹:

- Missing unaccompanied migrant children receive a lower priority than other missing children cases in Denmark and Belgium where there is a fixed ‘no action’ period before the start of local police investigations
- In Slovenia, the police will work with the reception centre to establish the circumstances of any unaccompanied migrant children who may have disappeared. However, if the child has not returned in three days, their application for asylum is considered as ‘withdrawn’. No further investigative action is taken in this situation.
- Only four countries have legal or procedural regulations on missing migrant children.

### Missing Children Europe’s efforts

Missing Children Europe’s mission is to enable the development of effective and holistic child protection systems to prevent disappearances, support missing children and their families, and to protect children from any risk of violence and abuse that may lead to or result from going missing.

Missing unaccompanied migrant children are one of the three thematic priorities in the work of Missing Children Europe.

Advocacy efforts have been undertaken to make sure that these children remain visible and to enhance the quality of protection standards across Europe. To this end Missing Children Europe promotes an enhanced use of existing tools for cross border cooperation in missing person cases (for example SIS II, 116 000 hotlines, Interpol alerts etc.) in cases of disappearances of unaccompanied migrant children.

- **The project SUMMIT**

Missing Children Europe is also working on capacity building of professionals working with migrant children in Europe. These include reception and care operators, law enforcement and hotlines for missing children. Research undertaken in 7 countries in the framework of the EU co-funded project SUMMIT, “Safeguarding unaccompanied migrant children from going missing by identifying best practices and training actors on interagency cooperation” showed that the large majority of professionals have never received training in preventing or responding to disappearances, nor in the aftercare of children who were previously missing. This results in the lack of proper assessment of physiological and psychological needs of the unaccompanied child, including the risks of going missing and the dangers related to it. The study also highlights that cross border cooperation between care institutions, law enforcement and networks for missing children in responding to these disappearances is almost non-existent. Cooperation is jeopardised by a lack of clarity on the roles of agencies in differing countries and on the procedures to follow. Inefficient national information sharing between agencies and difficult unambiguous identification of the child also impedes efficient transnational cooperation.

Missing Children Europe and SUMMIT project partners are developing a handbook presenting demonstrated good practices on how to improve interagency cooperation in prevention and response to the disappearances of unaccompanied children. The handbook is targeted at all professionals involved in these cases. Training material for professionals is also being developed in response to the general lack of training in this matter.

### Missing Children Europe’s recommendations

The comprehensive strategy to cover missing and unaccompanied children announced by the recently adopted European Commission in the Agenda on Migration should be developed without delay and included in the third implementation package of the agenda. This strategy should prioritise operational developments to improve the assessment of the needs of all children at risk of going missing, as well as cross border cooperation in cases of disappearances, with a special focus on the needs of unaccompanied migrant children.

There is a clear need to enhance coordination at European level in police operations aiming at handling cases of missing unaccompanied migrant children, especially considering that criminal organisations are targeting young asylum seekers.

Strategies aiming at providing an enhanced protection of unaccompanied migrant children and at reducing the number of unaccompanied migrant children going missing will also benefit from improved systems of data collection and sharing, essential to identify trends and develop evidence based policies and responses to the problem.

European Institutions should ensure that unaccompanied migrant children can apply for international protection in the country they are in, unless this is clearly not in their best interest. The best interest of the child should always prevail on the basis of an individual examination of the case. This provision should be included in the Dublin Regulation without delay, in order to prevent children from going missing for fear of a Dublin transfer back to the country or situation they were fleeing.
Existing tools created to respond to child disappearances, like the 116 000 hotlines for missing children, should be empowered to better support law enforcement and asylum authorities. Hotlines’ expertise in missing cases would be especially useful to build bridges between the different actors involved in the protection of unaccompanied migrant children and in cross border cases.

In relation to these recommendations, Missing Children Europe has identified three urgent areas of actions where the European Commission could have a positive impact if providing funding. Missing Children Europe has included three project per area in its work programme for 2016 for which it will seek funding:

1. **Improvement of cross border cooperation in cases of disappearances of unaccompanied migrant children**
   - LOCATE, PROTECT, EXCHANGE: This project aims at identifying the shortcomings of current procedures and developing recommendations and concrete options for more efficient solutions. The project brings together law enforcement, child protection authorities, reception centres and 116 000 hotlines to work jointly on operational exercises. The plan is for the exercise to be rolled out in six countries, chosen among those with the highest percentages of disappearances and those that the majority of children on the move consider a destination. The project is envisaged to have a duration of two years.

2. **Support to children on the move**
   - I-MISSYOU: a child-friendly app for children on the move: The project aims to facilitate access of unaccompanied children to services capable of helping them while on the move. Through the app, children will find geo-localised information that can help in protecting them from harm, including references to available services on their path, such as shelters, hospitals, support services for victims of trafficking, police stations, asylum authorities etc. The app will be available in several languages, chosen among those that are spoken by the majority of migrant children, plus English and French. Training will be provided for a number of key stakeholders in order to be able to respond to the needs of an unaccompanied child on the move getting in touch, to provide correct information and to connect them with the most appropriate service.

3. **Improvement of the well-being of children to prevent them from going missing**
   - The project aims at improving the well-being of unaccompanied migrant children who have been irregularly moving through Europe (especially if they are at risk of going missing and becoming victims of trafficking and exploitation), in particular by enhancing their participation in decisions regarding their future. The project will include research focusing on three topics: a) determination of the psychological effects deriving from the decision to pursue an irregular migration plan that has led the child to move alone within Europe; b) determination of reasons for absconding from care once they have successfully arrived in their country of destination; c) determination of what the most important components that affect his or her well-being once they have arrived in a country where they want to settle and how this affects the decision to abscond again or to live irregularly. Research will be conducted in UK, Netherlands, Sweden and Germany. These are countries that unaccompanied children often consider “of destination” but are also where the number of unaccompanied migrant children going missing is very high.

For more information please contact
Federica Toscano
Federica.toscano@missingchildreneurope.eu

MissingChildrenEurope
MissingChildEu
Rue de l’Industrie 10, 1000, Brussels, Belgium
+32 2 894 74 84
www.missingchildreneurope.eu

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