



## Submission to the UK House of Lords report on missing unaccompanied migrant children

This written evidence is submitted by Missing Children Europe, in the framework of the inquiry into unaccompanied minors in the EU, launched by the The House of Lords EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee.

### Definition of the Problem

1. More than 89,000 unaccompanied children arrived in the European Union in 2015<sup>1</sup>, which represents a dramatic increase from to the 23,000 unaccompanied children arriving in 2014. The majority arrived by boat through the Mediterranean and by land through the Western Balkan route (between 19 June and late November 2015, the Republic of Macedonia registered over 15,000 unaccompanied children crossing the border with Greece)<sup>2</sup>. Even when beginning their journeys with parents or siblings, many children are intentionally separated from family members and taken by child traffickers or smugglers. In an increasing number of cases, children end up separated from their family due to the chaotic situation in the Balkans. According to Europol<sup>3</sup>, 10,000 of unaccompanied children have disappeared within hours of being registered and only a handful have been found since. We believe that this number represents only a part of the reality.

2. Unaccompanied 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 of them may have not applied for protection, either because they lack information, or they are discouraged by the perceived length and complexity of the procedure, or they are aware of having small or no chances to apply successfully. In some cases, children may decide to pursue their own migration plan outside regular procedures available, relying on help and information collected from peers, family members or smugglers. Some children are detached from the protection system by criminal networks looking to exploit them for profit<sup>4</sup>. As reported by Europol recently<sup>5</sup>, 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 labour. Victims for exploitation are “especially those of a young age, young women, the unaccompanied”.

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<sup>1</sup> Data was collected from public websites and governmental sources.

<sup>2</sup> [Data Brief: Migration of Children to Europe](#) (IOM and UNICEF, Nov. 2015)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees>

<sup>4</sup> [Best practice and key challenges for interagency cooperation to safeguard unaccompanied migrant children from going missing](#), hereinafter referred to as “SUMMIT study” (Missing Children Europe & the University of Portsmouth, 2016). P.13.

<sup>5</sup> [Unaccompanied young refugees in Europe 'at risk from criminal gangs'](#). (The Guardian, Nov.2015)





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3. Inconsistent data management and sharing prevent us from knowing the full extent of the presence and the disappearance of unaccompanied children in the EU. In addition, as mentioned above, not all unaccompanied children are asylum seekers, many unaccompanied children go missing before being registered and according to several studies<sup>6</sup>, the disappearance of unaccompanied children is underreported.

4. However, efforts have been undertaken to understand the extent of the issue. These efforts also demonstrate that the problem of missing unaccompanied migrant children has been a concern for several years already.

- ❖ In Belgium, research undertaken by Child Focus in 2005 recorded that unaccompanied children seeking asylum disappear in approximately 25% of the cases within the first 48 hours upon arrival.<sup>7</sup>
- ❖ 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.<sup>8</sup>
- ❖ In 2010, Terres des Hommes calculated that up to half of unaccompanied children vanish each year from reception centres in Belgium, France, Spain and Switzerland, mainly in the first 48 hours after their admission to the centres.<sup>9</sup>
- ❖ In Sweden, more than 800 children have disappeared in the last five years. In 2014, Sweridge Radio reported 374 unaccompanied children went missing and only 59 have been tracked down.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>
- ❖ In Italy, the CONNECT project reported that, in 2013, 24% of registered unaccompanied 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 children of the 14,243 who were registered after arriving via boat went missing from reception centres.<sup>12</sup> The Ministry of Welfare reported that in 2015, 62% (5,100) of all unaccompanied children who had arrived between January and May 2015 went missing.<sup>13</sup>
- ❖ In Germany, on January 1 2016, the Federal Criminal Police (BKA) said that 4749 unaccompanied children are considered to be missing. 431 among them are younger than 13-years-old, 4,287 between 14 and 17-years-old and 31 aged 18. On July 1, 2015 the number of missing unaccompanied refugees was 1,637<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. [Missing children in the European Union](#) (European Commission, 2013) and

<sup>7</sup> "Studie over het profiel en het traject van niet-begeleide minderjarige asielzoekers in ons land". (Child Focus, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> [Unaccompanied Minors in the Migration Process](#). (Frontex, 2010)

<sup>9</sup> [Disappearing, departing, running away A surfeit of children in Europe?](#) (Terre des Hommes, 2010)

<sup>10</sup> [Hundreds of refugee youths disappear every year](#). (Radio Sweden, Feb. 2015)

<sup>11</sup> [Swedish town reports 1,000 missing children](#). (The Local, Oct 2015)

<sup>12</sup> [Migranti, l'allarme di Alfano: "3707 minori scomparsi dai centri di accoglienza"](#). (La Stampa, Jan. 2015)

<sup>13</sup> [Minori migranti: oltre 5.100 irreperibili su 8.200 arrivati, Migrantes Online](#). (Fondazione Migrantes, June 2015)

<sup>14</sup> ["Up to 5,000 migrant children disappeared into criminal underworld of abuse in Germany"](#). (Express, Feb.2016)





5. Data collected from [hotlines for missing children](#), operated in 29 countries through the 116 000 telephone number, reveals that unaccompanied migrant children go missing from age 8 up to 17 years. It also shows that despite the enormous risks to which unaccompanied migrant children are exposed, their disappearance is usually underreported<sup>15</sup>, as missing unaccompanied children make only 1% of the caseload reported by 116 000 hotlines in 2015.

6. Missing unaccompanied children are first of all missing children, entitled to the same protection as any other child. All actions and laws which apply to missing children in general equally apply to unaccompanied children. However, according to the 2013 EC study *Missing children in the European Union Mapping, Data Collection and Statistics*<sup>16</sup>:

- ❖ In Belgium, the disappearance from the “observation and research centre” is only reported to the police when it is considered alarming;
- ❖ In Denmark, missing migrant children have to be reported immediately if they are younger than 15 years, while for those aged above 15 a 24hour intervention threshold is set;
- ❖ Finland also sets a 24hour waiting period before declaring a child missing, while;
- ❖ Hungary makes a distinction between children that do and do not seek asylum. It is noted that, whilst asylum seeking children rarely go missing, non-asylum seeking children often disappear within the first 24-48 hours, so they are not usually recorded until after this time has elapsed.
- ❖ In Slovenia the police will work with the asylum home to establish the circumstances of any unaccompanied migrant children who 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 a minority of countries report to have legal or procedural regulations on missing migrant children. Those are Austria, Finland, Ireland and Romania.

### **Findings from the SUMMIT project**

7. 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. Among other activities in this field, Missing Children Europe is coordinating the [EU co-funded project SUMMIT](#), “Safeguarding unaccompanied migrant children from going missing by identifying best practices and training actors on interagency cooperation”. The SUMMIT project is implemented in cooperation with the University of Portsmouth (UK), NIDOS (NL), Defence

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<sup>15</sup> See above, footnote 4.

<sup>16</sup> See: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/missing\\_children\\_study\\_2013\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/missing_children_study_2013_en.pdf)





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for children-ECPAT (NL), TUSLA (IR), KMOP (EL) and Child Circle (BE). Associate Partners of SUMMIT are Telefono Azzurro (IT), Child Focus (BE), Missing People (UK), Consortium "Hope for Children" UNCRC Policy Centre (CY), Fundacion Anar (ES) and The Smile of the Child (EL).

8. On 2 March 2016, Missing Children Europe published the study [Best practice and key challenges for interagency cooperation to safeguard unaccompanied migrant children from going missing](#) (hereinafter referred to as "SUMMIT study"). The study reflects insight from the actors who deal primarily with the reception of unaccompanied children and those who focus on the disappearance of children. It examines key challenges and good practices in preventing and responding to disappearance of unaccompanied children in seven EU countries, namely Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, who represent countries that are often considered "of transit" and "of destination" by migrant children. As you can read in the SUMMIT Study, despite the different geographical position and role of each one of the countries involved in this migrant crisis, challenges encountered by professionals are very similar.

9. Missing Children Europe suggests to the House of Lords EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee to refer to the SUMMIT study, available at [http://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Docs/report\\_SUMMIT%20-%20Safeguarding%20Unaccompanied%20Migrant%20Minors\\_1mrt.pdf](http://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Docs/report_SUMMIT%20-%20Safeguarding%20Unaccompanied%20Migrant%20Minors_1mrt.pdf), to find relevant elements in response to question 2.b. Below you can find a summary of some of the main challenges encountered by frontline professionals in the protection of unaccompanied children from going missing.

10. 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<sup>17</sup>. 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<sup>18</sup>. 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. When triggered, is based on personal connections, rather than on formal, clear and standard procedures<sup>19</sup>. Cooperation is jeopardised by a lack of clarity on the roles of agencies in differing countries and on the procedures to follow<sup>20</sup>. Inefficient national information sharing between agencies and difficult unambiguous identification of the child also impedes efficient transnational cooperation<sup>21</sup>.

11. Another result of the SUMMIT project will be a handbook presenting demonstrated good practices on how to improve interagency cooperation in prevention and response to the

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<sup>17</sup> Summit study, ch. 3.5.

<sup>18</sup> Summit study, ch. 3.2.3 and ch. 3.3.7.

<sup>19</sup> Summit study, ch. 3.3.6

<sup>20</sup> Summit study, ch. 3.2.5 and 3.3.6

<sup>21</sup> Summit study, ch. 3.2.2





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disappearances of unaccompanied children. The handbook is targeted at all professionals involved in these cases. The handbook will be presented at the SUMMIT Training seminar, which will take place on 14-15 April 2016 in Brussels.

### **Missing Children Europe's recommendations to the EU and Member States**

12. The comprehensive strategy to cover missing and unaccompanied children announced by the recently adopted [European Commission in the Agenda on Migration](#)<sup>22</sup> should be developed without delay and ideally included in the next implementation package. 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.

13. 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.

14. 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.

15. 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.

16. The EU should promote 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. These tools should be empowered to better support law enforcement and asylum authorities in cases of unaccompanied children. Hotlines' expertise in missing children 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.

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<sup>22</sup> See footnote 28, p.12.

