

Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated

Overview of Trends
January to December 2021



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Some
24,100
children



71%

arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, Cyprus and Malta in 2021 (**8% girls and 92% boys**) – **44%** higher than total number of children arrivals in 2020 (16,700).

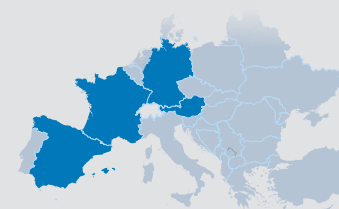
children who arrived in Europe in 2021 were unaccompanied and separated. **76%** of children who arrived in Italy in 2021 were UASC.



Some
8,600
children

24% girls and 27% boys were in resettlement procedures in Europe in 2021.

Of all the children



who sought international protection in Europe in 2021, some 70% were registered in just four countries: **Germany (42%), France (15%), Austria (7%) and Spain (5%)**.

Arrivals to Europe in 2021¹

In 2021, **24,147** children arrived in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain. Of these, **17,185 (71%)** were unaccompanied or separated children (UASC).² Child arrivals increased by **44%** in 2021 compared to 2020 (**16,700**).

Greece

Some 2,258 children arrived by land and sea in 2021,³ 51% fewer than the previous year (4,602) in line with a broader decline in overall arrivals compared to 2020. Of these, 638 were UASC (28%), 29% fewer than in 2020 (895). Most of the children, including UASC, were from Afghanistan, Syrian Arab Republic, Somalia, and Iraq.

Spain

In 2021, some 4,173 children were estimated to have arrived by sea, a 7% increase compared to 2020 (3,890).⁴ Of these, 2,856 were UASC (68%), 14% fewer than in 2020 (3,340). According to estimates, most of the children, including UASC, originated from Morocco, Algeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali.

Italy

More than twice the number of children arrived in 2021 (13,203) compared to 2020 (6,252). Of these, 76% (10,053) were UASC, a proportion consistent with recent years. Most of the children, including UASC, originated from Tunisia, Egypt, Bangladesh and Côte d'Ivoire.⁵

Bulgaria

Some 3,730 children lodged an asylum application in 2021, 85% of whom were UASC (3,172). Most of these asylum-seeking children originated from Afghanistan, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.⁶

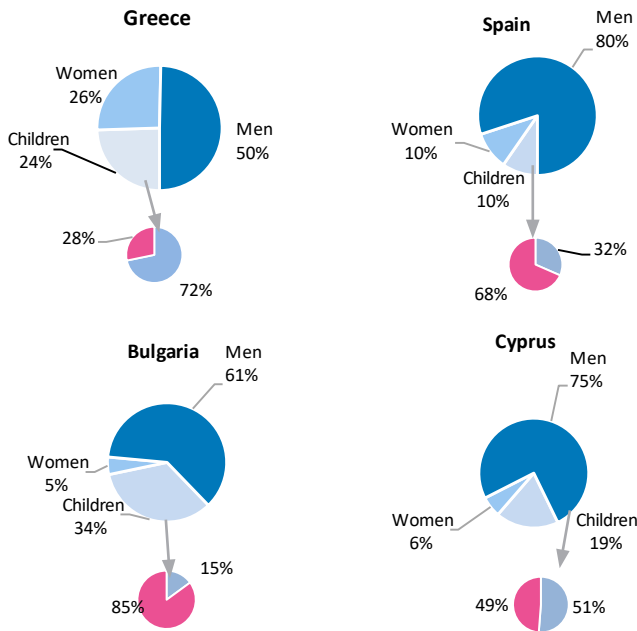
Malta

In 2021, some 248⁷ children, including 205 UASC (83%), arrived following search and rescue operations at sea. The number of child arrivals, including UASC, in 2021 was 59% lower compared to 2020 (610). Most of the children, including UASC, originated from Egypt, Eritrea and the Syrian Arab Republic.

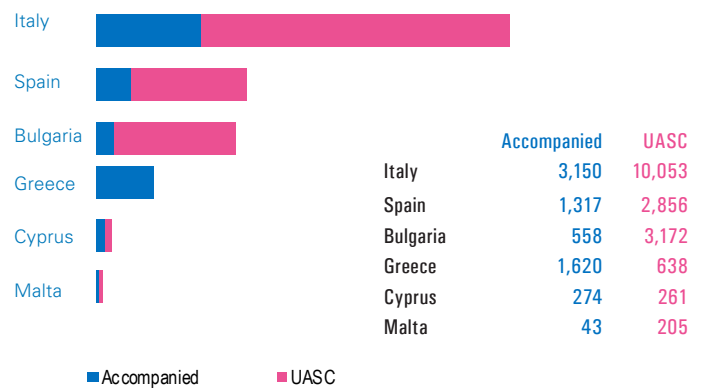
Cyprus

Some 535 children arrived by sea in 2021, including 261 UASC. All of the children, including UASC, who arrived by sea originated from the Syrian Arab Republic.

Demographic of Arrivals, including Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children

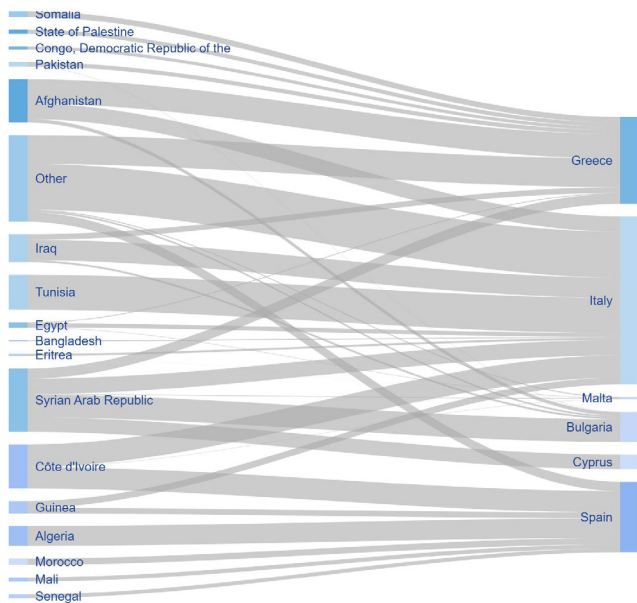


Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children by Country of Arrival

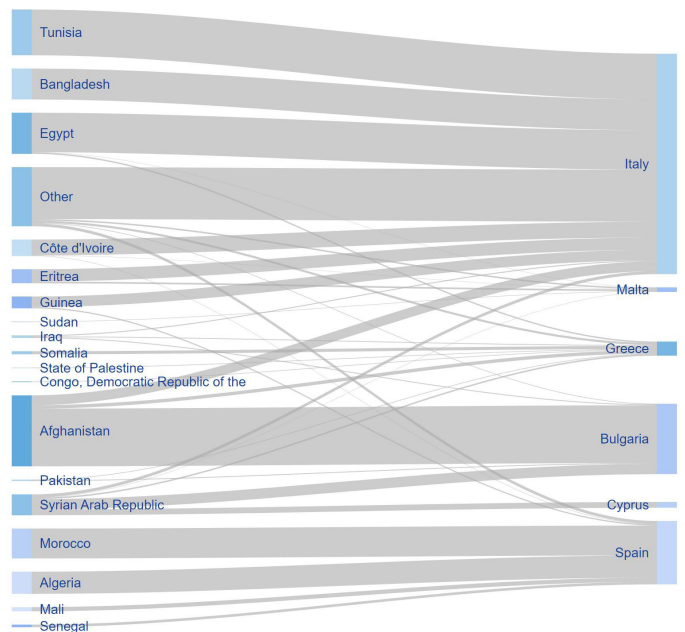


Nationality of Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children by Country of Arrival

Accompanied Children by Country of Origin and Arrival



UASC by Country of Origin and Arrival

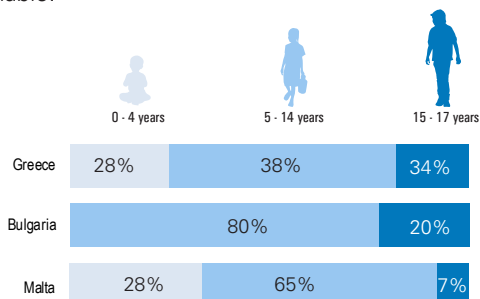


Source: Hellenic Police, EKKA; Italian Ministry of Interior; Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees; Spanish Ministry of Interior (MOI), Spanish Ombudsman; Maltese Immigration Police; and Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement, Malta (MHSE).

Age and Gender breakdown of all Children by Country of Arrival

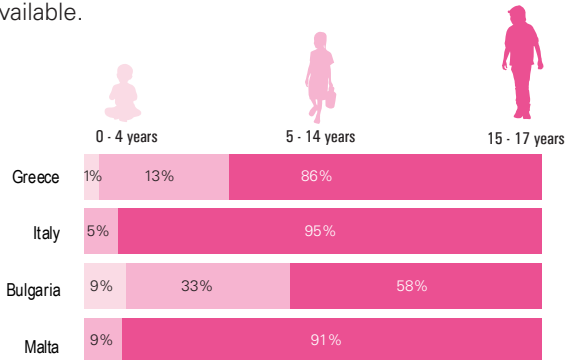
Accompanied children – Age breakdown

Among the 2,170 accompanied children who arrived in Bulgaria, Greece and Malta in 2021, 20% were 0-4 years old, 50% were 5-14 years old and 30% were 15-17 years old. The age breakdown for accompanied children in Cyprus, Italy and Spain is not available.



Unaccompanied children – Age breakdown

Most UASC who arrived in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Malta in 2021 were between 15 and 17 years old (86% overall). Age disaggregated data on children arriving in Cyprus and Spain is not available.

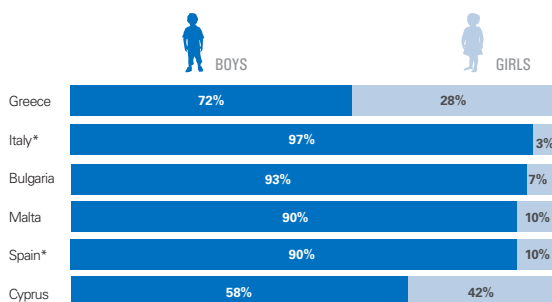


Source: Hellenic Police, EKKA, Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies on UASC in reception, Spanish Ministry of Interior (MOI), Spanish Ombudsman, Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees, Maltese Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement (MHSE).

Note: Due to the limited disaggregation or inconsistency of data by age and sex across countries, these graphs refer to estimates.

Gender breakdown of children by country of arrival

Overall, the proportion of boys remains high, comprising 92% of all children who arrived via the Eastern, Central and Western Mediterranean and Northwest African maritime routes in 2021. The percentage of boys arriving unaccompanied in Italy, Malta and Spain was significantly higher than average: 97% in Italy, 93% in Bulgaria, and 90% in Malta and Spain each. Meanwhile, the percentage of girls arriving in Greece decreased from 42% in 2020 to 28% in 2021.



* For Italy, the calculation is based on the estimated 12,248 UASC registered in the reception system in 2021, according to the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

* Spain: There exist discrepancies depending on the source of information consulted on the number of unaccompanied foreign minors arriving in Spain. In this sense, it is important to point out that the Committee on the Rights of the Child has been demanding Spain for years to adapt the age assessment procedure to international standards, through its final observations⁹ and its multiple decisions against Spain.⁹ To these demands, other must be added, such as the Tariff Declaration¹⁰, adopted by the different Ombudsman's Offices, at regional and national level, and those of social organizations specializing in childhood.¹¹ As a consequence, the age determination procedure is being reviewed in Spain by competent authorities and the implementation of the new procedure has been announced to take place in 2022.

Refugee and migrant children's journey to Europe

In 2021, IOM interviewed 852 refugees and migrants who arrived by sea in Spain (landing on the Peninsular coasts or on the Canary Islands) and by land in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).¹² Out of the total, 332 interviews were conducted with adolescents and young adults between 14 and 24 years of age: these represented about 42% (226 interviews) of the total in Spain and 33% (106 interviews) of the total in BiH. All interviews with children aged 14 to 17 years old (17) were conducted in BiH.

Western Mediterranean and Northwest African maritime route

Socioeconomic Profile

In Spain, 81% of young migrants and refugees surveyed were males and 19% were females. One quarter of them were below 20 years of age at the time of the survey. Fifteen female young adults and 7 male young adults reported to have children, with them or left in the country of origin.

Out of the total respondents (226), 68% of respondents originated from countries in West and Central Africa, followed by 32% from North Africa and only 1 respondent from the Syrian Arab Republic. Of the 15 countries of origin reported, the top five were Mali (50, mostly from the Kayes and Bamako regions), Morocco (50, mostly from the Taza - Al Hoceima - Taoute and the Oriental regions), Côte d'Ivoire (32, mostly from the district of the capital Abidjan), Guinea (25, mainly from Conakry) and Algeria (22, from Algiers, Oran, Setif, Tlemcen regions). Only two of the young adults interviewed reported to have been internally displaced prior to leaving their country (Mali).

Some 41% of all child arrivals via these routes reported to have completed secondary lower education, 33% primary education, 13% no formal education, 9% religious or other types of non-formal education, and the remaining 4% higher secondary education. Almost three quarters (65%) reported to be unemployed before leaving their origin country, followed by 19% employed or self-employed, 7% studying and 1% who had completed an apprentice.

Journey

Most respondents reported to have travelled alone (73%), while 19% travelled with a group of non-family members, and only 8% with at least one family member (siblings or children mainly). About 6% (14) reported to have spent more than one year in a country different than that of origin before moving again toward Europe.

Reasons and Intentions

Some 103 of the young respondents (46%) cited economic reasons as the primary motivation for leaving their country of origin, followed by war and conflict (34), being subject to or threatened with personal violence (22) and limited access to basic services (16). Among the reasons related to safety and security, children mentioned violent family disputes, lack of family at all, as well as the lack of freedom of expression or democracy.

At the time of departing from country of origin, the most common intended destinations were Spain (65%), France (21%), Morocco (4%), Mauritania (2%) and other European countries. At the time of the interview, the most common final intended destination remained mainly Spain (60%) and France (31%), while the rest of respondents mentioned the intention to reach other European countries (mainly Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal and the Netherlands).

Among the main challenges and risks reported by respondents while travelling toward Spain were robbery (13%), hunger (11%), financial problems (9%), documents stolen and lack of shelter (5%), health problems (1%). Among their most pressing needs, young migrants and refugees reported accommodation, legal assistance, the possibility to contact family and the possibility to continue the journey.

Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes

Socioeconomic profile

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), 94% of young migrants and refugees surveyed were males (100) and 6% (6) were females. About 16% (17) were children between 14 and 17 years of age, 19% (20) were between 18 and 19 years old, and the remaining 65% were between 20 and 24 years old at the time of the survey. Five respondents (2 females, 3 males) reported to have children.

Out of the total respondents (106), 83% originated from either Afghanistan (49) or Pakistan (34), followed by 7% from Western and Central Africa (Cameroon, Gambia and Ghana), 5% from North Africa (Algeria, Egypt and Morocco) and the remaining 5% from other countries in Asia and the Middle East. Among Afghans, Kabul and Nangahar were the main reported provinces of origin, while among Pakistanis, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were the most common provinces of origin. Six children and young adults reported to have been internally displaced before departing abroad: 3 Afghans, 1 Gambian, 1 Pakistani and 1 Syrian.

Some 37% of the total respondents reported to have completed primary education, followed by 32% secondary lower education, 14% upper secondary education, 11% post-secondary and tertiary education, 4% no formal education and the remaining 3% religious or other types of non-formal education. More than one quarter (35%) reported to be employed or self-employed before leaving their origin country, followed by 31% who were unemployed but looking for a job, 20% who were students and the remaining who were unemployed but not looking for a job. This information was not available for 2 respondents.

Journey

About 42% of children and young adults reported to have travelled alone, while 38% travelled with a group of non-family members (4 reported they travelled with facilitators), and 21% with at least one family member (siblings or spouse

and children mainly). About 45% of respondents reported to have departed from a country different than that of origin before moving again toward Europe: most reported to have departed from Greece or Türkiye after having spent more than one year there.

Reasons and intentions

Almost half of the children and young adults (48%) reported war and conflict as the primary reason for leaving their country of origin, followed by economic motivations (22%), being subject to or threatened with personal violence (9%), need to pursue higher education (7%) or re-join family (5%), and others (10%). Among the reasons related to safety and security, respondents mentioned violent family disputes, domestic violence, discrimination or persecution because one's family, religious or professional belonging.

At the time of departing from country of origin, the most common intended destinations were Italy (25%), Germany (24%), France (17%), the United Kingdom (8%), Belgium (7%) and other European countries. Similar shares of preferences for intended final destinations were reported at the moment of the interview.

Among the main challenges and risks reported by respondents while travelling toward Europe, there were financial problems (reported by 63% of the total), lack of shelter (59%), hunger (52%), robbery (43%), health problems (33%, mostly leg injuries, fever, stomach infections) and documents stolen (22%). Among their most pressing needs, young migrants and refugees reported cash assistance, accommodation, legal assistance, clothing and the possibility to continue the journey.

Overall, 45% of all young migrant and refugee respondents answered 'yes' to at least one of the six direct indicators of abuse, exploitation and violence based on their experience.¹³ Of the total number of young migrant and refugee who responded positively to at least one of these indicators, 6% are female. Greece and Türkiye were the countries where most of the reported violence and abuses occurred, followed by other countries of transit before the respondents reached BiH.

Source: IOM's DTM Europe — Flow Monitoring Surveys in Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2021)



Asylum Applications and Decisions

In 2021, European countries reported that 551,020 new asylum-seekers (first-time applicants) applied for international protection.¹⁴ Nearly one-third of them were children (173,550), a 29% increase from 2020 (134,725).

Some 41% of all new asylum-seeking children were girls. Germany, France, Austria, Spain, Belgium, and Greece recorded the largest numbers of new asylum applications from children. It received more than two-thirds of all first-time child asylum applicants in Europe. Germany recorded 42% of all child asylum applications in 2021 (73,245), followed by France (25,750, or 15%), Austria (11,460, or 7%), Spain (9,185 or 5%), Belgium (7,225, or 4%), and Greece (7,035 or 4%).

In 2021, 19,995 unaccompanied children lodged asylum applications in the EU, 47% more than in 2020 (13,625). Again, Afghanistan stood as the leading country of origin of asylum-seeking children (54%), followed by the Syrian Arab Republic (19%), Somalia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Egypt (5% each).

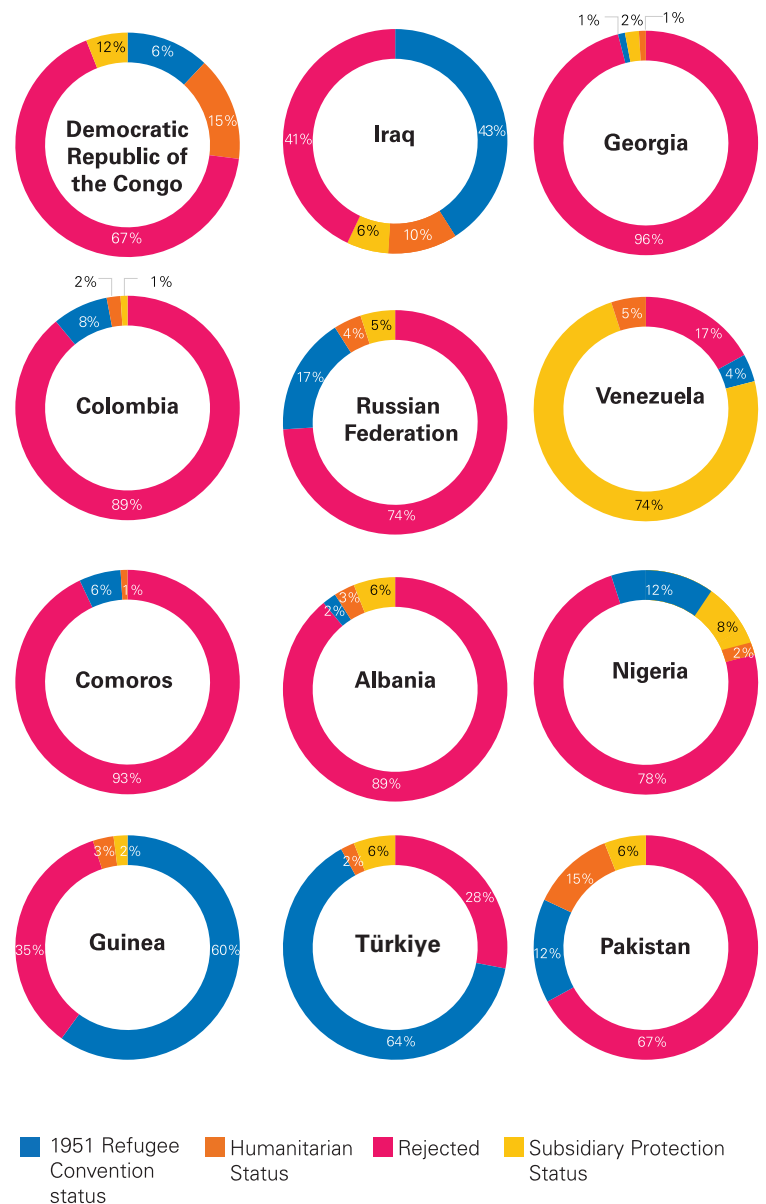
In 2021, national authorities across the EU issued 150,975 first instance decisions on child asylum applications. Of these, 60% were positive decisions, one percent more than in 2019. Germany (38%), France (20%), Greece and Spain (8% each) issued two-thirds of all first instance decisions on child asylum applications.

Germany issued the most positive decisions granting 'refugee status' and 'subsidiary protection' to Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan children. Meanwhile, Spain issued the most decisions granting humanitarian status to Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela children. In contrast, France issued most decisions granting 'refugee status' to Guinea, Afghan, and Côte d'Ivoire children after Germany. Though refugee and subsidiary protection status are defined by EU law, humanitarian reasons are specific to national legislation and not applicable in all Member States.

Out of 90,375 children who received a positive decision in the first instance, 66% were granted refugee status (63% in 2020), 23% subsidiary protection (20% in 2020) and 11% humanitarian status (17% in 2020). At the same time, Germany, France and Spain also contributed two-thirds of the first instance decisions on the children's asylum applications.

About 40% of all first-time asylum-seeking children who applied for international protection were rejected. Among the top countries of origin, the share of adverse decisions was notably higher for children from Georgia (96%), Albania and Colombia (89% each), Nigeria (78%), Russia (74%), Côte d'Ivoire (53%), Iraq (41%), Türkiye (28%), and Afghanistan (17%).

Decisions on Child Asylum Applications in 2021



Relocation

Despite the continuing difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, relocation has remained an important means of supporting vulnerable people, including UASC, and enhancing solidarity among States, with some 2,853 beneficiaries assisted through relocation from Greece, Italy and Malta to 16 European countries in 2021 (-7% compared those relocated during 2020).

IOM, together with involved governments and partner agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF and EUAA (former EASO), coordinated and implemented regional relocation projects throughout the year, namely RELITA (Italy), REMA (Malta) and the Voluntary Relocation (Greece).

The DUBS scheme¹⁵ ended in March 2021, with no arrivals to the United Kingdom during the reporting period.

Some 1,465 children (961 boys and 504 girls) were relocated from Greece, Italy and Malta to other European countries in 2021. This included 482 UASC, who were relocated mainly from Greece to France (301), Portugal (84), Finland (39), Ireland (28), Italy (10), the Netherlands (11), Bulgaria (3), Luxembourg (2), Germany (2). In addition, 137 cases of unaccompanied children who became adult before the transfer were also assisted with relocation in 2021. Moreover, 2 UASC were relocated from Malta to Finland and Portugal.

UNHCR has conducted Focus-Group Discussions with the children relocated from Greece to France and Finland. Overall, 11 FGDs were conducted with 58 children, in 2020 and 2021. These interactions allowed to gather the views of the children on the information they received on the procedure, pre-departure experience, access to protection, education, family reunification, health and recreational activities.

Returns from Greece to Türkiye

Of all persons returned from Greece to Türkiye under the EU-Türkiye Statement between 2016 and 2020 (2,140), 5% were children. All were returned with their families.

Source: [Returns from Greece to Türkiye](#)

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) of Children and UASC

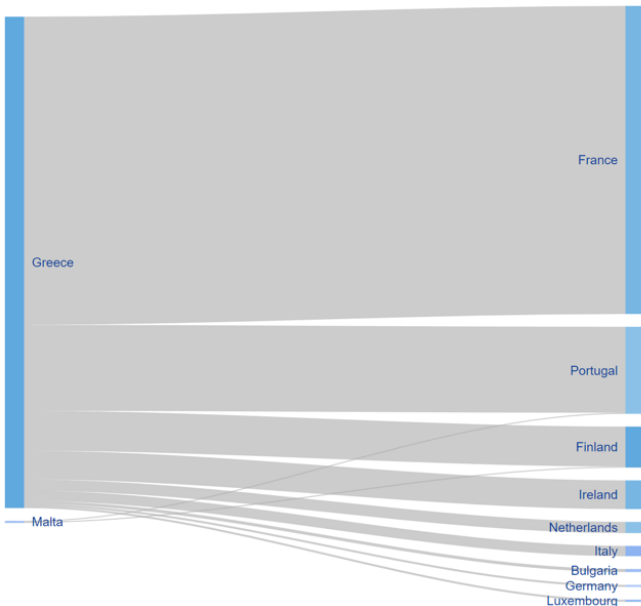
In 2021, IOM provided AVRR support to 17,173 migrants in returning from European Economic Area (EEA) countries, the United Kingdom and Switzerland (37% of all migrants assisted globally) to their origin countries. Of these, 40% (6,870) were assisted in returning from Germany alone, and about 19% (3,313) were children, including 55 UASC.

Of all beneficiaries assisted in returning from the EEA region, the United Kingdom and Switzerland, around 44% (7,536) returned to countries in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia; 22% (3,826) to Asia and the Pacific, 13% (2,247) to the Middle East and North Africa, 7% (1,232) to South America and the rest, 14% (2,332), to other regions.

Among the 3,313 children assisted in returning from the EEA region, their main countries of nationality were Brazil, Iraq, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, North Macedonia, Albania, Mongolia and the Russian Federation.

Children Resettled in Europe

Of the 17,000 people in resettlement procedures in Europe in 2021, 51% were children (27% boys and 24% girls). Sweden, Norway, Germany, France, Finland and Spain were the main countries in Europe considering children's resettlement cases. Syrians, Congolese (Democratic Republic of Congo), Sudanese and Eritreans were the most common nationalities of children whose cases were being considered for resettlement by European States.



Definitions:

“**Separated children** are children (...) who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary care-giver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.” [\[source\]](#)

“**Unaccompanied children** (also called unaccompanied minors) are children (...) who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.” [\[source\]](#)

A “**refugee**” is a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (Article 1 A 1951 Refugee Convention).

An “**asylum-seeker**” is a person who has applied for asylum and is awaiting a decision as to whether they are a refugee. Determination of refugee status can only be of a declaratory nature. Indeed, any person is a refugee within the framework of a given instrument if they meet the criteria of the refugee definition in that instrument, whether they are formally recognized as a refugee or not (UNHCR Note on Determination of Refugee Status under International Instruments). [\[source\]](#)

A “**migrant**” refers to any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from their habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is. [\[source\]](#)

Limitation of available data on Children and UASC

There is no comprehensive data on arrivals (both adults and children) in Europe, especially by land and air, as such movements are largely irregular and involve smuggling networks, which are difficult to track. If collected, data is rarely disaggregated by nationality, risk category, gender or age. Reliable data on the number of UASC either arriving or currently residing in different European countries is often unavailable. The number of asylum applications filed by UASC is used to provide an indication of trends but does not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the caseload due to backlogs in national asylum systems, onward irregular movements or children not applying for asylum at all. In addition, due to different definitions and national procedures and practices, collecting accurate data on separated children specifically is very challenging (e.g. separated children being registered as either accompanied or unaccompanied). It should also be noted that data for the period January to December 2021 on UASC asylum applications were not available or final for all EU Member States on the Eurostat website at the time this factsheet was released.

Jointly compiled and produced by:

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About the factsheet

This factsheet is jointly produced by UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM with the aim to support evidence-based decision-making and advocacy on issues related to refugee and migrant children.

The document provides an overview of the situation in Europe with regards to refugee and migrant children (accompanied and UASC). It compiles key child-related data based on available official sources: arrival, asylum applications, asylum decisions, profiling of arrivals, relocation from Greece and Italy under the EU relocation scheme, as well as returns from Greece to Türkiye under the EU-Türkiye statement.

The present factsheet covers the period January to December 2021, which provide up-to-date information on refugee and migrant children, including unaccompanied and separated children.

Endnotes

- Data on arrivals is partial due to the large scale of irregular movements. The data reflects both sea and land arrivals in Greece, and sea arrivals in Cyprus, Italy, Malta and Spain. Data for Spain is based on the Ministry of Interior’s statistics and UNHCR’s estimates.
- Separated children are children separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members. Unaccompanied children are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so (IASC).
- Arrival figures for Greece are collected in the framework of UNHCR’s border activities and National Coordination Centre for Border Control, Immigration and Asylum (ESKESMA).
- UNHCR estimated figures pending provision of final figures by the Spanish Ministry of Interior (MOI); figures on UASC arrivals in Ceuta and Melilla are not included. Children arriving in the Canary Islands from Western Africa through the Atlantic are included.
- Data on arrivals and demographics of refugees and migrants registered in Italy is based on information received from the Italian Ministry of Interior.
- Statistics for Bulgaria are collected by the State Agency for Refugees. Observations on data and trends that are not typically compiled by government institutions are collected by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.
- Estimate on data provided by the Immigration Police and the Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and Law Enforcement (MHSE), Malta. UASC figures are based on age declared by the refugees and migrants upon arrival. Not all persons who make such a declaration are recognized to be UASC by the authorities after the age assessment is completed.
- UN Committee on the Rights of Child Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Spain, CRC/C/ESP/CO/5-6, March 2018, page 44, available at: <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRICAqhKb7yhsyTWwDcXbcdH-Jgod%2F48JvVLFjyw69pQaQdk3icKuqRzUXTOu9Jkdy7484z0GISTKXAAbmzZQRDft4dH-K6kwj%2B88PsBa5U52YlaA437fBzH>
- United Nations Public information department, Spain’s age assessment procedures violate migrant children’s rights, UN committee finds, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/10/spains-age-assessment-procedures-violate-migrant-children-rights-un?LangID=E&NewsID=26375>, October 13, 2020. Among main decisions: United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, *A.L. c. España* (comunicación n° 16/2017) CRC/C/81/D/16/2017. CRC Decision issued in May 2019. United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, *J.A.B. c. España* (comunicación n° 22/2017) CRC/C/81/D/22/2017. Decision issued in May 2019. United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child, *R.Y.S. v. España* (Comunicación núm. 76/2019) Decision issued in February 2021
- Declaración de los Defensores del Pueblo de España en defensa de niños y niñas extranjeros no acompañados En la ciudad de Tarifa (Cádiz)*, October 2019. See also *Documento de síntesis de las 34º Jornadas de Coordinación de Defensores del Pueblo sobre Atención a menores extranjeros no acompañados*, October 2019.
- UNICEF (2019), *Los derechos de los niños y niñas migrantes no acompañados en la frontera sur española*, (p.62); Fundación Raíces, *Fundación Consejo General De La Abogacía Española* (2014), *Solo por estar solos; Defensor del Pueblo* (2017), *Informe anual 2017*, p. 269.
- IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Flow Monitoring Surveys were carried out through a network of 26 data collectors in 30 monitoring points located on entry, transit and exit locations in Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Spain, only adults were interviewed.
- The list of indicators considered included: Having worked without getting the expected payment; Being forced to work; Offers of an arranged marriage; Being kept at a certain location against their will; Experienced some form of physical violence; Observed threats with sexual violence. For more details, please see: <https://migration.iom.int/reports/europe-flow-monitoring-surveys-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2021?close=true>
- European Union Member States, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.
- “DUBS” project – The Transfer of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children from France, Greece and Italy to the United Kingdom, is a UK Home Office-funded project implemented by IOM UK in coordination with IOM missions in France, Greece and Italy from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2021.



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