

# Uprooted

THE GROWING CRISIS FOR  
REFUGEE AND MIGRANT  
CHILDREN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
AND KEY FINDINGS

unicef    
70 YEARS FOR EVERY CHILD

Around the world, nearly 50 million children have migrated across borders or been forcibly displaced – and this is a conservative estimate. More than half of these girls and boys fled violence and insecurity – 28 million in total.

These children may be refugees, internally displaced or migrants, but first and foremost, they are children: no matter where they come from, whoever they are, and without exception.

Children do not bear any responsibility for the bombs and bullets, the gang violence, persecution, the shriveled crops and low family wages driving them from their homes. They are, however, always the first to be affected by war, conflict, climate change and poverty.

Children in these contexts are among the most vulnerable people on earth and this vulnerability is only getting worse. The number of child refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate has more than doubled in just 10 years – this shocking statistic is simply unacceptable.

### ***Their world is no place for a child.***

Migrating and displaced children are at risk of some of the worst forms of abuse and harm. Often dependent on human smuggling, they can easily fall victim to traffickers and other criminals. Many are subjected to extreme forms of abuse and deprivation during their journeys.

### ***The violations have to stop.***

When, and if, these children reach destination countries, the threats they face do not disappear. Despite extraordinary and generous actions to help them in many places and by many people and organizations, children and their families struggle to gain a foothold. Refugee and migrant children disproportionately face poverty and exclusion at a time when they are in desperate need of essential services and protection.

Supporting displaced and migrant children at home and globally is a shared responsibility – shared because no one is untouched by the impacts of the multiple crises in the world.

Children's voices, their plight and the issues they face must become the focus of international debates on migration and displacement.

This report presents, for the first time, comprehensive, global data about these children – where they are born, where they move, and some of the dangers they face along the way. The report sheds light on the truly global nature of childhood migration and displacement, highlighting the major challenges faced by child migrants and refugees in every region.

# Action for children cannot wait

Based on the findings of the report and its work in the field, UNICEF has developed six goals and practical suggestions to protect child migrants and refugees and provide them with hope for the future:

- >> Protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence**  
Introduce measures to strengthen child protection systems, including the training of social and child workers and working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and professional groups. Clamp down on trafficking, not only through enhanced law enforcement, but also by providing better support to migrant children through the systematic appointment of qualified guardians; better access to information regarding their own situation and the management of their cases; and access to legal assistance. Governments should also develop clearer guidance for case officers when determining the migration status of children, to prevent the return of children and families to persecution, dangerous or life-threatening situations, using the 'best interest of the child' principle to guide legal decision-making in all cases.
- >> End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating**  
Introduce practical alternatives to detention wherever children (or their families) are involved, given the negative impact of detention on a child's development. Children are particularly vulnerable to physical and psychological violence. Examples of alternatives to detention include: the surrender of passport and regular reporting requirements; guarantors or bailees who may be family members or community supporters; foster care and supervised independent living for unaccompanied and separated children; and compulsory registration with authorities.
- >> Keep families together as the best way to protect children and give children legal status**  
Develop clear policy guidance to keep children from being separated from their parents during border control processing and any migrant legal processes. States should speed-up procedures and make it easier for children to reunite with their families, including with their extended families in destination countries. States should pursue all practical measures to reunify children with their families. Children born to migrant parents need legal identity for their future wellbeing. Governments should provide birth registration and/or other identity documents to enable children to access services and avoid statelessness.
- >> Keep all refugee and migrant children learning and give them access to health and other quality services**  
An increased collective effort by governments, communities and the private sector is needed to provide education, health, shelter, nutrition, water and sanitation, and access to legal and psychosocial support to these children. This is not only a collective responsibility, it is in all societies' common interests. A child's migration status should never represent a barrier to accessing essential services.
- >> Press for action on the underlying causes of large-scale movements of refugees and migrants**  
Address the root causes of conflict, violence and extreme poverty in countries of origin. This should include increasing access to education and social protection; expanding opportunities for family income and youth employment; and fostering more accountable and transparent governance. Governments should facilitate community dialogue and engagement towards peaceful conflict resolution, tolerance and a more inclusive society; and should take measures against gang violence.
- >> Promote measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries of transit and destination**  
Coalitions of NGOs, communities, private sector, religious groups and political leaders should take responsibility for influencing public opinion to prevent the rise of xenophobia and discrimination toward refugees.

## The Global Perspective

The story of child refugees and migrants is a global story, not one confined to a single region

Nearly

# 1 in 200

children in the world  
is a child refugee 

Nearly

# 1 in 3

children living outside  
their country of birth  
is a refugee 

# 2x

 as many child  
refugees\* in 2015  
than in 2005

### Data about children are crucial to decision-making but are incomplete

Children are too often relegated to the fringes of the world's debates about migration and displacement. One reason is the lack of hard numbers to support the case for children. Without reliable data, evidence-based debates and policymaking are hampered.

Global estimates are incomplete and therefore do not tell us the whole story. We do not know where all the world's child refugees and migrants were born, how old they are, or whether their migration was forced or voluntary. There are even fewer comprehensive and comparable indications about how child migrants fare in their countries of origin, transit, and destination.

This report is an effort to bring together the best data that are available, but effectively addressing the rights and needs of children requires concerted action to fill the gaps that remain.

### Child refugees

- > 31 million children live outside their country of birth, including 11 million child refugees and asylum-seekers.
- > Nearly one in three children living outside their country of birth is a refugee; for adults, the proportion under UNHCR's mandate is less than 1 in 20.
- > In 2015, just two countries – the Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan – accounted for nearly half of all child refugees under UNHCR's mandate; about three-quarters of all child refugees under UNHCR's mandate came from only 10 countries.
- > Today, nearly 1 in every 200 children in the world is a child refugee. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of child refugees under the UNHCR's mandate more than doubled. During the same period, the total number of all child migrants rose by 21 per cent.
- > Approximately 10 million child refugees are hosted across the world, primarily within the regions where they were born.
- > Girls and boys are equally represented among registered refugees, although children's risk of specific protection violations – such as recruitment by armed forces and armed groups, or sexual and gender-based violence – may differ between girls and boys.
- > Overall, the refugee population is much younger than the migrant population. While a clear majority of the world's migrants are adults, children now comprise half of all refugees.
- > The 10 countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees are all in Asia and Africa, with Turkey hosting by-far the largest total number of refugees under UNHCR's mandate. Although complete age-disaggregated data are not available for refugees in Turkey, its substantial share of total refugees makes Turkey likely the host of the largest number of child refugees in the world.

### Internally displaced children

- > By the end of 2015, some 41 million people were displaced by violence and conflict within their own countries; an estimated 17 million of them were children.
- > At the end of 2015, 19.2 million people had been internally displaced by violence and conflict across Asia, a staggering 47 per cent of the global total for similar internal displacements.
- > Together, the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq and Yemen accounted for nearly one-third of the world's total of conflict-induced internal displacements by the end of 2015.
- > There were 12.4 million internally displaced persons by conflict and violence across Africa in 2015. Four countries in Africa – Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic and South Sudan – were among the top 10 countries globally for new, violence-induced internal displacements in 2015.

\*Under UNHCR's mandate

## Child migrants

- > Globally, three out of every five international child migrants live in Asia or Africa.
- > Since 1990, the proportion of international child migrants within the global child population has remained stable at just over 1 per cent, but a rising global population means that the absolute number of child migrants has increased significantly in the past 25 years.
- > Today, 1 in every 70 children worldwide lives outside their country of birth. Like adults, most children who move migrate primarily within their own geographical region.
- > When girls and boys move across international borders, they do so in almost equal numbers. This pattern is contrary to adult migration, where there are pronounced differences in the proportion of men and women by region.
- > Half of all the world's child migrants live in just 15 countries, led by the United States of America, which is home to 3.7 million child migrants.

Around the world

**1 in 8** migrants is a child



Around the world

**28 million**

children have been forcibly displaced



And there are

**20 million**  
other international child migrants



## The Regional Perspective

### Childhood migration and displacement look different in each region of the world

More than half of all international migration is composed of movements within regions, and the three largest migration movements in the world are all intra-regional. Refugee movements are even more concentrated within regions than with general migration.

### Africa

- > Some 86 per cent of African refugees find asylum in other African countries.
- > 5.4 million refugees originate from African countries and children are disproportionately represented among them.
- > Approximately one half of African refugees are children – nearly three million children who have been forced from their own countries and are confronting the world's harshest realities. Africa has one of the world's lowest rates of child migration, with just 1 in 90 African children living outside their country of birth.
- > While the total rates of migration are low, the share of children among Africa's migrants is the largest for any region. Nearly one in three African migrants is a child, more than twice the global average.

**1 in 3** African migrants is a child





The Americas are home to

**6.3 million**


child migrants, 1/5 of the global total



### The Americas

- > Four out of five child migrants in the Americas live in just three countries: the United States, Mexico, and Canada.
- > The Americas are home to 6.3 million child migrants - 21 per cent of the global total.
- > One in 10 migrants in the Americas is a child, but that average masks two distinct realities: children make up a relatively small proportion of migrants living in Northern America, South America and the Caribbean (8, 15, and 15 per cent, respectively); and children comprise 43 per cent of all migrants living in Central America.
- > There is a high and increasing number of vulnerable children moving on their own within the Americas – often fleeing violence in their homes and communities.
- > Dramatic increases in the number of children apprehended by immigration authorities at the southern border of the United States reflect underlying challenges for children in their countries of origin and underscore the importance of United States' migration legislation, policy and enforcement decisions for children throughout the region.

### Asia



Asia is home to

**2 in 5** of the world's child migrants



- > Nearly 12 million of the world's international child migrants live in Asia. This represents 39 per cent of all international child migrants, well below Asia's 56 per cent share of the global child population.
- > As a result of its large overall population, Asia is home to the largest total number of child migrants in the world. However, a relatively low proportion of its children migrate: just 1 in 110 of Asia's children live outside their country of birth.
- > Saudi Arabia hosts the largest number of child migrants in Asia and the second highest number of child migrants in the world.
- > Other Asian countries hosting large numbers of child migrants – which include Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey – all host large numbers of child refugees. This reflects the continuing toll of conflict rather than a trend of voluntary child movement.
- > The five countries and territories hosting the largest numbers of refugees in the world are all in Asia.
- > In 2015, around 45 per cent of all child refugees under UNHCR's mandate had origins in the Syrian Arab Republic and Afghanistan.

## Europe

- > At the end of 2015, Europe hosted approximately one in nine of all refugees under UNHCR's mandate, a total of 1.8 million people. An additional one million asylum-seekers in Europe were also awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications.
- > Data availability and disaggregation vary widely across the region. Among the European countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees, only Germany and Serbia publically report comprehensive numbers and percentages of children in their overall totals of refugees.
- > More than twice as many children applied for asylum within the European Union and free movement zone in 2015 compared to 2014; in the first half of 2016, nearly 70 per cent of children seeking asylum in the European Union and free movement zone were fleeing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan and Iraq.
- > The 5.4 million child migrants in Europe are just 7 per cent of all the region's migrants. This is the lowest share of children in a total migrant population for any region. Approximately one in six of the world's child migrants lives in Europe.

\*European Union and free movement zone

# 7 in 10

children seeking asylum in Europe\* in 2016 were fleeing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan and Iraq



## Oceania

- > Child migrants constitute a high proportion of all children in Oceania. Six in every 100 children in the region are migrants.
- > The 670,000 child migrants living in Oceania represent 2 per cent of child migrants in the world.
- > Children represent a relatively small proportion of the migrant population in Oceania, making up just 8 per cent of all migrants in the region.
- > Between 1990 and 2015, the total number of child migrants increased in Oceania from 430,000 to 670,000, but overall migration rose faster, meaning that children now make up a slightly smaller proportion of the migrant population than they did 25 years ago.
- > Just over 48,000 refugees live in Oceania. While disaggregated data on the number of children in that total are not available, recent reports indicate that children seeking refuge in the region face serious danger as they attempt to reach safer shores.

Oceania is the destination for nearly

# 7 million

migrants from outside the region



Around the world, nearly 50 million children have migrated across borders or been forcibly displaced – and this is a conservative estimate. More than half of these girls and boys fled violence and insecurity – 28 million in total.

These children may be refugees, internally displaced or migrants, but first and foremost, they are children: no matter where they come from, whoever they are, and without exception.



Published by UNICEF  
Division of Data, Research and Policy  
3 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017, USA

[www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
September 2016

Cover Photo: Addis, holding his 30-month-old son, Lato, sits in a cell at the Alghaiha detention centre in the coastal town of Garabulli on the north-western coast of Libya. The detention facility houses migrants apprehended while attempting the dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. Addis, from Eritrea, is now a single parent. He and his wife decided to leave their homeland right after Lato was born. The family spent two years in Sudan, where Addis worked as a driver. "After that, we decided to go to Tripoli, where my brother is working in a supermarket," he said. His wife died during the journey by truck between Sudan and Libya. With the help of another man making the journey, he buried her under the sand. "Now I am here in this detention center because, as we were only 200 kilometres from Tripoli, the police caught us at a check point. My dream is still to join my brother in Tripoli and offer a better life to my son," he said.

© UNICEF/UNI187398/Romenzi