

## Risks Facing Children on the Move and Effects of Movement

This summary describes the risks faced by children as well as the effects of movement on children.

### Risks on the Move

As explained in our infographic, there is a whole spectrum of movement types for children. Those that involve irregular migration, travel without trusted adults, and forced displacement generally attract more risk. Here are some simple reasons why:

1. Irregular migration. Migrants do not possess the authorisation or documents to enter countries - this means they face a barrier to entry, and are likely to spend more time in 'movement' - where they don't have fixed shelters and living resources. This is associated with exposure to hardships on the move, poor living conditions, and a possible repatriation to their dangerous origins.
2. Travel without adult supervision. Without an adult to take care of children (due to separation or being unaccompanied from the start), children are less able to protect and take care of themselves. UASC<sup>1</sup> are prone to traffickers and negative influences without an adult to protect and guide them.
3. Forced displacement. When people are forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict, instability, or disaster, they are not likely to have made the necessary travel arrangements (i.e. authorisation, means of travel). This means they are likely to travel over long distances by foot, ad-hoc transport or rely on smugglers, enduring physical hardship along the way. A UNICEF analysis found that refugee populations contained a much higher proportion of children - at 51% - compared to non-refugee international migrants (UNICEF, 2018).

This puts children at risk of:

- Violence and abuse. Children are at heightened risk of violence, sexual violence and abuse, especially in overcrowded and exposed reception centres. UASC can be particularly vulnerable as they lack the protection and care of an adult who is responsible for them. Even at UASC-specific reception facilities, it is difficult to separate them from adults due to a systemic lack of capacity;
- Threats to personal safety and health. Lack of shelter and living resources, exposure to elements, and threats to personal safety en route e.g. risk of drowning if travelling by boat across the Mediterranean;
- Psychological distress. This arises from prolonged separation from family and caregivers. In addition, undergoing the journey without a trusted adult places additional stress on children who have already endured an arduous journey;
- Separation. Children may be separated from their parents or caregivers while travelling - border crossings, reception areas and transit points are usually chaotic;

*“Movement might place [children] at risk (or at an increased risk) of economic or sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence”*

- Terre des Hommes International Federation (2018)

<sup>1</sup> Unaccompanied and Separated Children

- Smuggling and exploitation. UASC may find it more difficult to navigate the procedures and processes for

*“They are exposed to exploitation, abuse and trafficking; and UASC trying to earn money for the continuation of their journey, or required to pay off their travels to date, are at times exploited by smugglers and manipulated into working for them. Smugglers often also prey on UASC under the age of 14 to support them in gaining clientele, because children cannot be prosecuted for these offenses”*

- Save the Children and International Rescue Committee (2017)

border crossings and asylum applications, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation by adults;

- Unconducive conditions in reception centres/ facilities. This can range from having no segregation from adults, to a lack of formal and informal education.

Contributing factors to these risks include the fact that UASC may claim they are adults to avoid detention so as to continue their journeys towards their desired destination countries. Even when detected and transferred to facilities, children may still abscond before having their asylum claims processed and their protection needs determined (IOM, 2015).

### Effects of Movement on Children

#### Psychological trauma

- Facing adversity at home and having to undergo an arduous journey away from home - some without the company of trusted adults - undermines the psychological health of children on the move;
- After they have been transferred to reception centres or settled in a host country, children still face adversity in the forms of isolation, alienation, or even hostility from locals;
- *“As a result, an unaccompanied refugee minor suffers from disproportionately higher levels of mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, than children who migrate with their parents or peers who are not migrants.”* (O’Higgins, Ott and Shea, 2018, p.2).

#### Wasted potential

- Education is an empowering tool - it allows people to reach their full potential, and is an investment that provides immense returns;
- When children on the move lack access to education, they will likely form dependencies on aid and face limited career opportunities.

#### Delinquency

- Without adequate guidance in an unconducive environment for positive character development, children are more vulnerable to negative influences and may turn to crime;
- Limited career opportunities arising from a lack of education may divert turns children towards illegal activity.

If you would like to learn more, please visit [childhub.org](http://childhub.org) where you can find other material relating to children on the move. This includes summaries on the treatment of children at various borders or countries, as well as good practices for social workers.

The following sources were consulted and referred to in the writing of this summary. Readers may find these sources insightful.

Written by Ser Jay Tan in 2018.

## References

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