



The Summit Project Experience on Disappearances of Unaccompanied Children in Europe
WEBINAR SUMMARY
13 Oct 2016

I. Experts:

Rebecca O'Donnell is the co-founder of Child Circle, a Brussels based NGO focussing on child protection in EU law and policy (www.childcircle.eu).

Federica Toscano is the focal point on missing unaccompanied children at Missing Children Europe. She also managed the EU co-funded project SUMMIT (Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation).

II. Content:

Mrs. Toscano started by saying that Missing Children is a network on 30 organizations working on behalf of missing and sexually exploited children in 26 European countries. It protects them from disappearance and from violence/abuse that could lead to disappearance as well as analyzes consequences from missing.

She stressed that presentation will be divided into the project's general introduction, reasons why it was developed and its results, followed by a specific action of the project, which would be explained by Mrs. O'Donnell.

Mrs. Toscano emphasized that unaccompanied children represent a large part of the refugees that have arrived and are currently arriving to Europe. According to European statistics, 89,000 unaccompanied arrived to the continent in 2015. This number only includes those who applied to asylum, since many European countries only collect data on asylum applicants.

In 2016, in Greece, unaccompanied children represented 35 percent of total arrivals. However, since the shelter system in the country is not able to support them, after August 31, 1,500 children were without shelter. In Germany, 9,000 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in the first half of 2016. In Italy, 93 percent of children arriving by sea are unaccompanied, the majority being Eritrean, with over 7,000 of them in total.

Missing unaccompanied children is not a new problem, as reporters have been published on the matter since 2005. Up to 50 percent of children unaccompanied disappear from reception centers, especially in the first 48 hours since their arrival. The numbers increased in 2015-2016, but only 1-2 percent of the cases of this specific group of children are actually reported, since the normal missing child reporting channels do not apply for migrant children.

In 2015, Europol published a statement that 10,000 unaccompanied children went missing and feared that they were trafficked or returned to trafficking. The rising numbers have created more interest at national and European levels, but with little adjacent action being taken. In 2016, The European Agency for Fundamental Rights emphasized that, in Sweden, 7-8 unaccompanied children are reported missing every week. In Slovenia, 80 percent of children disappear from the open Asylum Home, while, in Germany, almost 9,000 registered children have been missing, over 800 under the age of 13.

The European Commission's Study on Missing Children in 2013 acknowledged that many European countries apply a standard no action period before the child's disappearance is reported, especially in cases of migrants. Also, the Study emphasized that only four European countries had in 2013 legal or procedural regulations on missing migrant children: Austria, Finland, Ireland and Romania.

Mrs. Toscano proceeded to highlighting the key causes why children usually go missing:

1. Wanting to apply for protection in another country;
2. Discouragement from length and complexity of procedures for protection and family unification;
3. Lack of information on procedures or receiving it in a way that is not child friendly;
4. Lack of trust in authorities;
5. Being a victim of trafficking or other forms of exploitation;
6. Fearing being sent back to another EU country or their home country.

The Summit Project identifies best practices and key challenges in inter-agency cooperation in the prevention of and response to vulnerable children who go missing from reception centers and other types of care.

The Project focused on several countries with either a key geographic position or role for children on the move: Italy, Spain, Cyprus and Greece, Belgium, Ireland, the United Kingdom. In gaining the needed research information, interviews were conducted with professionals, such as reception center operators, social services, guardians, law enforcement, hotlines for missing children, in order to understand the specific challenges encountered in taking care migrant children and for those responsible for missing children.

The key challenges that the Summit highlighted are:

1. the lack of effective systems to collect information on unaccompanied children and the lack of inter-agency information exchanges of information, as different pieces of knowledge are collected by various actors;
2. poor reception reception conditions in some countries;
3. lagging guardian systems: appointed after several months, the guardians need to be trained very well to establish trust with the child and there are huge standard variations between countries;
4. no reporting of disappearances: reporting is done for administrative purposes, not to follow up on the case, due to that carers not being trained on reporting procedures;
5. treating missing migrant children as a lower priority than other missing children;
6. persistent lack of training of professional on preventing and responding to missing migrant children, especially for guardians/carers;
7. no systematic risk assessment for children, regarding where to accommodate the child and how to help him/her;
8. inexistent cross-border cooperation: based on personal connections, even though there are actually tools to collaborate.

The Summit project aims to build bridges between stakeholders :

1. missing children experts: hotlines for missing children, law enforcement authorities;
2. carers responsible for the protection of unaccompanied minors: guardians, legal representatives, social services.

The Summit's Handbook, which is the key document produced as part of the project, provides examples of practices adopted in some local and national situations. These practices address some of the challenges mentioned above and present successful collaboration in protecting children.

The Handbook provides a compilation of definitions regarding missing children, the European Commission's guiding principles on an integrated child protection system as well as practices and tools for prevention, response and aftercare for missing unaccompanied minors.

Mrs. O'Donnell proceeded to addressing the wide range of legal obligations that apply in cases of disappearance. She emphasized that the fundamental legal obligations include providing special protection, when children are separated from their parents/caregivers, which encompasses preventing their disappearance from care centers.

Unaccompanied minors are treated in European and international law, including in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights and the EU Convention on Human Rights. The documents stress that the best interest of the child should be at the core of protection efforts.

Asylum and migration laws also focus on unaccompanied minors, setting obligations concerning assistance, especially guardianship. In crime control legislation, there are anti-smuggling and trafficking measures that could be relevant. EU data protection measures regulate sharing information on children, which is a stumbling block to collaboration on how to handle sensitive data.

As far as cross-border measures are concerned, Dublin III Regulations allow for family reunification transfers and could be a tool to preventing children from taking measures into their own hands, but the proceedings now are lengthy and complicated, taking sometimes even eleven months.

The EU Commission's Reflection Paper on Integrated Child Protection Systems provides ten principles, which should guide bodies working together. The Paper influences EU policies and approaches on dealing with migrant children. Regarding priorities for EU funding, Mrs. O'Donnell emphasized that setting child protection procedures in place and supporting multi-disciplinary work is a current priority.

Some of the guidelines for working with unaccompanied children include:

1. a state obligation to prevent the child's disappearance, even if the child is from another country: child protection laws should be applied and child protection should be involved;
2. engagement with the children and preventing them from acting by themselves as well as conducting needs assessment on behalf of the children, in order to secure the right conditions for them;
3. implementing a multidisciplinary approach between actors, setting protocols and processes in place as well as organizing trainings on risk identification.

Mrs. Toscano ended the webinar by presenting some practical tools that the Handbook contains, especially several templates, including for compiling information on unaccompanied children and for reporting their disappearance.