

# BECOMING ADULT

**Child mobility in the EU's refugee crisis: What are the data gaps and why do they matter?**

**Nando Sigona and Rachel Humphris**  
University of Birmingham

Working Paper – Becoming Adult: Conceptions of futures and wellbeing among migrant young people in the UK

**Researching young migrants'  
uncertain futures**

Child migration into Europe is diverse and often invisible in data and policy. Legal definitions, bureaucratic practices, rights and entitlements of child migrants vary across European states. While some segments of this population are visible in public debate and datasets, especially unaccompanied asylum seeking children, others are hardly visible, particularly dependent children to asylum seeking parents and undocumented children.

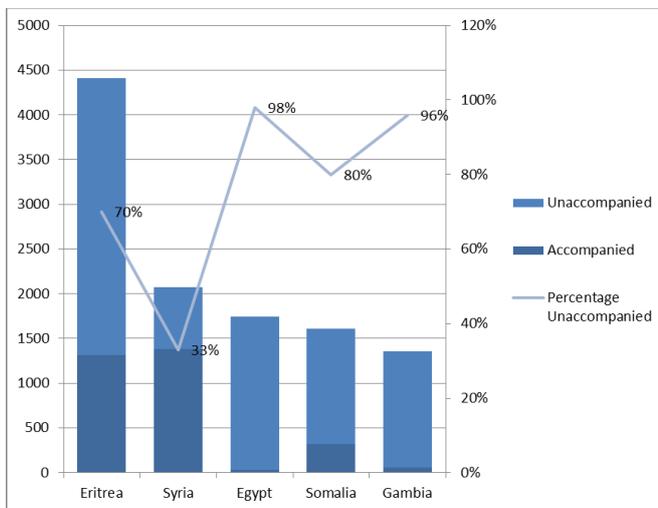
In a recent [IOM GMDC data briefing paper](#), we review the data sources and statistics collected about child refugees and migrants arriving by sea in the EU, in transit through different European Member States and at destination. We highlight the gaps and limitations in data collection and inconsistencies in terminology and point to their far-reaching effects for children and young people. Here we offer a brief discussion of three aspects touched in the data briefing.

## **Magnitude, profiles and routes**

Over one million people reached Italy and Greece by sea in 2015. The large majority of them are young men and women, including 250,000 children. According to UNHCR/IOM data, Greece received 94% child migrants arriving by boat, while a far smaller contingent made their way to Italy, roughly 16,500 minors. Interestingly, while only 10% of the child migrants arrived in Greece without parents or guardians according to a UNHCR estimate, in Italy, unaccompanied children were the overwhelming majority (72%) of those who made the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. A closer look at data on arrivals in Italy and Greece shows remarkable differences in terms of countries of origin across routes, but also reveals variations in terms of travelling arrangements (i.e. accompanied or unaccompanied) within a particular route. The overwhelming majority of minors from Egypt (98%) and Gambia (96%) embarked in the treacherous sea crossing from North Africa alone, whereas

the opposite was the case for the young Syrians who mostly travelled with a parent or guardian. In Greece, Syrians and Afghanis are the largest national groups, but while Syrians are more likely to travel with someone responsible for them, this is not the case for Afghan minors.

*Table 1: Top 5 nationalities and travel arrangements of under 18 arrivals in Italy in 2015. Elaboration: Nando Sigona; Source: IOM*



Sea arrivals should not be conflated with asylum data as first, not all boat migrants apply for asylum, and second, not everyone applying for asylum came via boat, however data on asylum in the EU are revealing. They show that 1.26 million first-time asylum applications were lodged in 2015; of them 365,000 were less than 18 years old. But, perhaps surprisingly given the focus on unaccompanied asylum seeking minors in current debate on child refugees, only 90,000 of them were recorded as unaccompanied minors. Furthermore, there is an absence in EU asylum data of consistent information relating the number of dependent children in asylum seeking families.

## **Definitions and data collection**

Despite widespread interest in the situation of unaccompanied minors in Europe, we found substantial differences in international, European and national definitions of children travelling alone. While attempts have been made to achieve some coherence at the EU level, these have not always been successful and substantial differences for example persist between countries that afford protection mostly on the basis of the condition of separation and age and leave the consideration of the asylum claim as secondary (for example Italy, Spain and France), and countries where the asylum claim is paramount and is initiated at an early stage and that may therefore quickly dismiss claims made by minors from so-called safe countries. Definitions are important because different categories provide different levels of [protection in law or in practice](#).

Inconsistencies also greatly complicate any attempt to understand the significance of the [phenomenon](#) comparatively.

For those who are recognised as UASC there are significant differences in the way data are collected and identification occurs. For example, in Austria only UASCs who receive basic welfare support are recorded. In Croatia only UASCs in children's homes are included in national statistics. In Spain, different regional authorities do not provide data in the same format and therefore they may be incomplete. In the UK each of the four nations differs in the way they collect and publish their statistics. This has implications because children may be moving between European Member States leading to aggregated numbers of 'missing' children on one hand and 'double counting' on the other.

## **Missing and double counting**

Data on unaccompanied minors in the EU is aggregated from national statistics. This process paradoxically can produce two opposite results: double counting and missing children.

Evidence from [Becoming Adult](#), for example, shows that in Italy double counting of unaccompanied minors is common, with some young people being recorded under the care of more than one local authority at the same time, with duplication being found only much later, if ever, as [databases are not joined-up](#). It may also occur that a young person who is willing to join families or friends in a northern EU state is recorded as unaccompanied at arrival in Italy but then, once she or he join family members elsewhere in Europe, she or he lodges an asylum application as an 'accompanied' minor. This phenomenon may be more widespread than many assume, considering that three quarter of asylum applications from minors in the EU are from accompanied children. So the paradox is here that a child who goes missing in Italy may well reappear in another EU country and be given a different bureaucratic label and thus double counted in EU aggregated data.

In general, across EU states there is no consistency in the definition of 'missing children'. Only half EU states hold statistics on UASC who went missing or absconded; where statistics are available these are often not comparable or not systematically collected. Only [a minority of countries report](#) to have specific legal or procedural regulations on missing migrant children (Austria, Finland, Ireland and Romania).

Reporting arrangements for such cases differ substantially. For example, in Estonia these cases are investigated immediately by local police (which issues a search alert), they receive instead a lower priority than general cases in Denmark, and in Belgium there is a fixed 'no action' period before the start of police investigations. In [England](#), local authorities have different temporal definitions and safeguarding protocols.

EU data collection has struggled to adjust to the rapid movement of people across EU borders and data or estimates on missing unaccompanied children may not take into consideration children who have 'reappeared' elsewhere in Europe.

## **Mind the data gaps**

There are many gaps and inconsistencies in data about children migrating to and through the EU. Although, in some cases data are collected daily on arrival in Greece and Italy, there is a lack of detail. Age and gender are not currently disaggregated for children arriving at the EU's southern borders, in all transit countries, and for all dependents in asylum claims. This would reveal the hitherto invisible children in Europe who are identified as 'accompanied'. This is crucial because the majority of migrant and refugee children who reached Europe by sea are accompanied.

There is also an absence of data on family reunification and deficiencies in data on detention and return (particularly those who were unaccompanied minors but have reached 18 years of age). Moreover, not only are there gaps in data coverage but also children are 'double-counted'. This occurs when disjointed recording mechanisms aggregate, rather than consolidate and synchronise their data. Double counting is exacerbated when data are aggregated at local, national and European levels.

Early in 2015 EUROPOL denounced the disappearance of 10,000 unaccompanied minors in the EU with a warning that they may be victims of unscrupulous traffickers and subject to exploitation and violence. Despite attempts made to question the [validity](#) of the figure and the agenda of the agency in stirring such moral outcry, the 'killer number' (a term used by NGO fundraisers) was far too appealing for well-meaning NGOs, advocates and politicians who were genuinely concerned with the plight of this invisible army of potential slaves. While it is unquestionable the existence of cases of exploitation and trafficking, we question the magnitude of the phenomenon and the justification given by EUROPOL which diverts attention away from the role of EU policy and practice vis-à-vis these children and also the legitimate aspirations of refugee and migrant children for example in relation to joining family members in Europe.

We argue that a more rigorous scrutiny of data and estimates can improve our understanding of the phenomenon of 'missing' children and its primary drivers and help us to refocus our efforts to address its structural causes in order to improve the situation of lone refugee and migrant children.