

LmunA 2022

Research report

Forum: UNICEF
Issue Preventing the further suffering of migrant and displaced children
Student Officers: Celeste de Jong & Marijn de Ruiter
Positions: Chair & Deputy chair



LMUNA

Lorentz Lyceum
Model United Nations
Arnhem

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Definitions of key terms	4
General overview	5
Major parties involved	9
Timeline of Key Events	11
Previous attempts to solve the issue	11
Possible solutions	12
Further reading	13
Bibliography	14

LmunA 2022

Introduction

Globally, the number of children and young people met with involuntary migration is dramatically increasing. Worldwide there are almost 34 million refugees and asylum seekers who have been forcibly displaced from their own countries, half of them children.

A wide range of interlinked factors—including economic, socio-political, and environmental factors—influence decisions on how, when, and where to migrate.

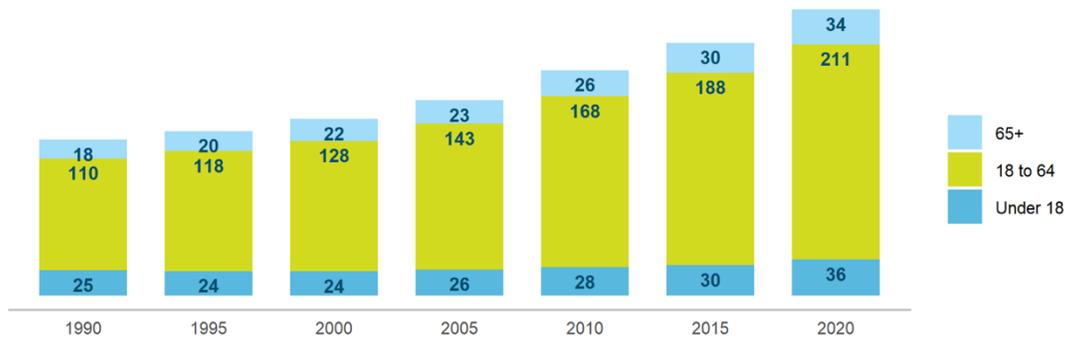
Despite significant data on migration in general, little exists on the movement of children and young people specifically. Child-sensitive research is essential, not only to understand how the international community can better protect the rights and well-being of children on the move but also to learn about migration journeys from children themselves.

(<https://www.unicef.org/media/83571/file/Global-Programme-Framework-on-Children-on-the-Move.pdf>) (<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/migration/>)

In 2020, the number of international migrants reached 281 million; 36 million of them were children.

In

Number of international migrants by age, 1990 to 2020 (in millions)



Note: International migrants refers to people living in a country or area other than they were born. In case information on the country of birth was not available, refers to people living in a country other than that of their citizenship.

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). International Migrant Stock 2020.

contrast to the positive effects of voluntary migration, forced displacement has enormously detrimental effects on all people, but especially on children. Studies from around the world indicate that children left behind by migrating caretakers face education, health, and psychosocial problems, including deteriorating academic performance and lower school

LmunA 2022

attendance, greater risk of drug abuse, early pregnancy, involvement in criminal activities and social dysfunction.

(<https://www.unicef-irc.org/research/children-and-migration-rights-and-resilience/>)

The most recent and growing flow of people leaving their communities of origin due to conflict, violence or poverty has made migration and displacement of children an urgent and increasingly polarizing global priority.

(<https://www.unicef-irc.org/research/children-and-migration-rights-and-resilience/>)

Definitions of key terms

Migrants

To the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Migrants are people who move from their countries of origin for “personal convenience”. This action, according to the agency, is the result of a decision made freely.

Refugees

The refugees, according to UNHCR, are the “people who flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom”.

Displaced children

The displaced are defined by the UNHCR as people who leave their homes for the same reasons as refugees. The difference is that the displaced do not cross the borders of their country of origin. Their movements are internal, towards safer areas within the same nation. They remain under the protection of their government, even when the government itself is the cause of their flight. This means that they retain their citizenship rights. ([Differences between migrants, refugees and displaced persons - JournalNow](#))

LmunA 2022

Transit

The action of passing through or across a place.

Trafficking

the unlawful act of transporting or coercing people in order to benefit from their work or service, typically in the form of forced labour or sexual exploitation.

General overview

Child migration mainly dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when the United Kingdom forced young children to migrate to Australia or Canada. Those children often came from workhouses, and orphaned families or they came from the streets of London and other big cities. They were sent off under the impression that they would lead happier lives. However, most children ended up at farms where they had to work as domestic slaves, often being subjected to physical or sexual abuse. The actual feelings of these child migrants were completely neglected at the time. They were taken away from all that was familiar and placed in a harsh physical environment, away from any family or people they knew. ([Child Migration History — Child Migrants Trust](#))([Child migration - The National Archives](#))([Britain's child migrant programme: why 130,000 children were shipped abroad | Child protection | The Guardian](#))

The same could be argued for current child migrants and displaced children. There are millions of children on the move. Some for voluntary, but many are for involuntary reasons. A wide range of interlinked factors—including economic, socio-political and environmental factors—influence decisions on how, when, and where to migrate. Children can still face many challenges and dangers within the borders of their own country. Thus, nearly all children who eventually become refugees started their journey with displacement. ([Child Displacement and Refugees - UNICEF DATA](#))

LmunA 2022

Motives

Children migrate for many different reasons. The most known motive is that children live in a war or conflict zone. They flee their country in search of a safer environment and chances for a future without the looming danger of violence and death. These children have been recorded to be either completely by themselves, with a parent or sibling or separated from any family while fleeing. The most recent example is the war in Ukraine. According to UNICEF, over 1,5 million children have fled Ukraine as refugees since February 24. ([Children fleeing war in Ukraine at heightened risk of trafficking and exploitation \(unicef.org\)](#))

Another, less acknowledged, reason for migration can be the deteriorating state of the environment children live in. With climate change becoming a bigger problem, many areas are subjected to natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods or bushfires, but also slow-onset climate change, like desert expansion and rising sea levels. Natural disasters displace 3 to 10 times more people than conflict or war because climate change often ignites conflicts. Due to drought and floods resources become scarce and thus conflicts intensify over those limited resources and more people fall into hunger or poverty. ([Fleeing Climate Change | UNICEF USA](#))

Poverty, growing inequalities and gangs are other occurrences that force children to flee from their homes. Especially in countries such as El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, homicide and poverty rates are alarmingly high. Each day, families face a heart-wrenching decision: stay and watch their children be recruited and exploited by gangs, or flee to a place they have never been, where an unfamiliar language is spoken, with hopes of international protection and a better future. ([Help Migrant Children Fleeing Violence and Poverty | UNICEF USA](#))

The aforementioned motives are all involuntarily. When these things occur, children do not have a choice, they must leave their country to escape life-threatening situations. Some motives are voluntary, to a certain extent. Some children choose to escape the future that awaits them, should they stay. They migrate for personal reasons. It is about finding a better way of life, that is, better access to quality education and work opportunities.

LmunA 2022

These motives include leaving family behind to escape prospects of forced marriage and genital mutilation or to flee abusive situations. Some children already have family living elsewhere, in better conditions, and decide to join them. The reasons mentioned above are noble. However, these defenceless children are exposed to many dangers during their trips. ([Child migration: the case of unaccompanied children - Humanium](#))

Dangers

For countless children, migration is safe and regular – helping them, their families and communities to grow and transform. But there is another reality for millions of children for whom migration is highly dangerous. In many cases, children and families without sufficiently safe and regular pathways to migrate have little choice but to turn to smugglers, traffickers and dangerous informal routes that put their safety at tremendous risk. The Central Mediterranean route is a case in point where thousands of vulnerable children risk their lives every year to reach Europe. ([In 2018 make migration safe for every child – UNICEF](#)) They may be forced into child labour, pressed into early marriage, put at risk of violence and exploitation and they often miss out on education and proper medical care.

Sadly, even in transit, children experience racism and xenophobia. The poisonous rhetoric on migration and asylum with states, media and other actors often demonises migrants and asylum seekers and promotes a narrative that favours welcoming some “deserving refugees” while criminalising, jailing and deporting “undeserving” migrants and asylum seekers, or creating divisions between “good migrants” and “bad migrants”. This divide is too often driven by economic demand, race and country of origin. ([women_in_migration_ts3.pdf \(un.org\)](#))

Women in transit may be at particular risk at international borders where special attention is required. Migrants of different genders experience migration and borders differently with a higher rate of mortality at the borders for women and gender non-conforming people than for men. ([women_in_migration_ts3.pdf \(un.org\)](#)) Furthermore, women are more likely to be victims of sexual exploitation along the way.

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Dangerous migration routes

The central Mediterranean is known as one of the most dangerous migration routes, having claimed more than 20.000 lives since 2014. The sea crossing from North Africa to Europe is attempted in improvised and overloaded boats, often piloted by traffickers or smugglers. These circumstances care to an extremely unsafe and life-threatening journey. This route continues to claim an alarmingly high number of lives due to a lack of concrete action by countries.

Secondly, the internal routes of Africa. This crossing through the Sahara desert is extremely dangerous. Many African migrants must first cross the Sahara to reach North Africa in an attempt to reach Europe from there on. Many die from a lack of energy or water. What makes the route more unsafe are the drug gangs operating in the area and the violence from smugglers and border agents. This route has claimed around 5.500 lives since 2014.

Thirdly, is the US-Mexico border. The geography in this area is impossible and the biggest cause of death in this crossing is drowning in the dangerous Rio Grande river. Some try to escape this fate by travelling in vehicles, namely trucks. This, however, leads to many other problems and is also a common cause of death.

Lastly, the routes in Asia, specifically the crossing of the Bay of Bengal and Andaman sea and the Iran-Turkey border. The former route is often attempted by Bangladeshi and Rohingya migrants in an attempt to reach a haven in neighbouring countries or Europe. The latter has mostly been used by Afghanistan migrants since the Taliban took power in August of last year. Especially migrants on these Asian routes are often victims of exploitation by gangs of human traffickers. ([What are the most dangerous migration routes in the world? | 24 News Recorder](#))

Destination

Only children who obtain the right of permanent residence in the territory of the receiving State benefit from it. The majority of children who do not get this right are in refugee camps which do not provide excellent living conditions and are likely to be repatriated to their home country. The children are often deported because of state policies or because asylum centres were at the top of

LmunA 2022

their capacities. This only worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic also made travel overall more dangerous for children. (([Child migration: the case of unaccompanied children - Humanium](#))) Many states have detention facilities, where separated children can temporarily reside. However, some of their facilities are more prison-like. Children are sleeping on thin mats in cages. This is an example from a facility in Texas near the Mexico-US border. ([Where Do Migrant Kids Go After Being Separated From Their Parents? It's Hard To Track \(bustle.com\)](#))

The many children who are being deported back to their home country face many challenges as well, it is not simply “going home”. They experience alienation and violence when arriving in their home country, and many children and families are unable to gain employment after a failed trip to neighbouring countries. One UNICEF representative said that some communities, too, think returned migrant girls were victims of sexual violence, and therefore “are somehow tainted.” ([What happens when migrant children are deported home | PBS NewsHour](#))

Consequences

After transit children are often left with severe mental health issues. The experiences they have had during transit are ones that no person, especially a child, should ever have to experience. Before even making the journey these children are already distressed and scared of the situation in their home country. Adding to that the deeply traumatizing events they experience during their journey, leave them with severe post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Moreover, children who were separated from their families during transit also experience more feelings of abandonment than children who were not separated. All these feelings can affect a child's development in the long run. As dr. Colleen Kraft, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, said “the relationship with a loving parent or primary caregiver is critical to a child's sense of self and safety.” The younger the child, the more critical this is, she said. ([What happens when migrant children are deported home | PBS NewsHour](#))

LmunA 2022

Major parties involved

United States of America

As can be seen in the diagram above, the United States is the country that hosted the most child migrants in 2020. The USA is a big country compared to the other host countries and is, therefore, able to host more children, an estimated 3,3 million in 2020 alone. Many of these children cross into the country via the US-Mexico border. The US is making significant strides in receiving unaccompanied children. But mainly due to the pandemic border protection and other refugee facilities have become overcrowded. ([Program: Rising Child Migration to the United States | migrationpolicy.org](#))

European Union

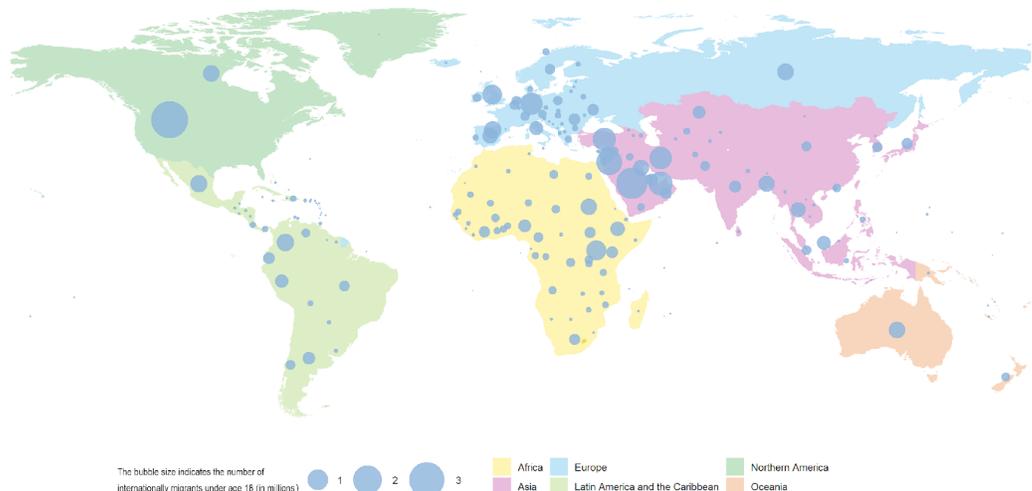
Besides the USA, Europe receives the most child migrants. Many of those move from one country in Europe to another one. An example is the war in Ukraine. Each country has their own policy regarding migration and immigration. However, the European Union must contribute in order for this issue to be solved.

Syria

Syria is the most common country of origin for child migrants, 22% of all child migrants in 2020 came from Syria. This can be drawn back to the ongoing civil war in the country that started in 2011.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan, with 13% of all child migrants in 2020, is the second biggest country of origin. Since the Taliban took over, the country has been an unsafe environment for many children, especially girls. ([Latest statistics and graphics on refugee and migrant children | UNICEF](#))



LmunA 2022

Timeline of Key Events

1618	The first occurrence of child migration. 100 children were sent from London to Virginia.
October 2013	A ship with migrants from Libya on their way to Italy sank near the island of Lampedusa. The tragedy claimed more than 360 lives. It was one of the biggest migrant disasters.
April 2018	President Trump implements his 'Zero Tolerance' policy.
December 2018	The UNGA affirmed the Global Refugee Compact.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

In December 2018 UN Member States affirmed the Global Refugee Compact and adopted the Orderly and Regular Migration in the annual resolution of the UNHCR. Both Global Compacts recognize the dignity and worth of the human person and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family; as well as the right to freedom of movement and the right to seek and enjoy asylum and safeguard their human rights in other countries.

(<https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/migrant-and-refugee-children>)

During the UN General Assembly Summit of 2018, Member States committed to working towards the adoption of a global compact on refugees and a worldwide compact for safe, regular, and orderly migration.

UNICEF provided significant inputs to the outcome document of the UNGA Summit, the 'New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants', and developed six policies asking to advocate for placing the best interests of children at the centre of the two 2018 Compacts.

LmunA 2022

UNICEF's six policy asks on migration and displacement are the following:

1. Protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence;
2. End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating;
3. Keep families together as the best way to protect children and give children legal status;
4. All refugee and migrant children keep learning and have access to health and other quality services;
5. Press for action on the underlying causes of large-scale movements of refugees and migrants;
6. Promote measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries and areas of transit and destination,

The six UNICEF policy asks emerged from a broad-based in-house consensus. While they signal the overarching direction of UNICEF's engagement on issues of migration, they may be adapted or prioritised according to the context.

(<https://www.unicef.org/media/83571/file/Global-Programme-Framework-on-Children-on-the-Move.pdf>)

Possible solutions

To prevent the suffering of the big number of misplaced and migrant children, a new, international approach may be needed.

Firstly, we should focus on providing resources to those in need. It is necessary to internationally strengthen services and systems for children and young people who move, and ensuring safe migration is an option for children and young people. Studies and interviews have found that children and young people are less familiar with the services that might be available. Those that do exist are often under-resourced to handle the demand. Common barriers to services include cost, location, language, and lack of identity documentation. To solve the suffering of these young people, we must find a way to internationally provide education and job supports the most. These are the areas in which children are disadvantaged most. The services that could give them the skills and means to improve their lives in the long-term, we must find a way to provide

LmunA 2022

those. (<https://www.unicef-irc.org/child-migration-hoa>)

(<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/how-you-can-help-migrant-children/>)

Secondly, a more nuanced approach may be needed to safeguard children on the move. Migration and displacement have both positive and negative impacts on the well-being of children. Therefore, it requires a multi-dimensional adaptive and more nuanced approach to understanding and responding to the needs of children and young people who move. Many times it is ignored that young people understand the risks involved and did not necessarily see migration as negative or dangerous. Instead, they see it as the best choice available to them at that given time.

The complexity of migration needs to be better understood. By its very nature, migration is dynamic, fluid, and often cyclical. Narrow definitions may impede an adaptive approach to programmes and policy, thus underserving the needs of children and young people on the move.

(<https://www.unicef-irc.org/child-migration-hoa>)

(<https://www.unicef.org/migrant-refugee-internally-displaced-children>)

Further reading

[Help Migrant Children Fleeing Violence and Poverty | UNICEF USA](#)

[What happens when migrant children are deported home | PBS NewsHour](#)

[Latest statistics and graphics on refugee and migrant children | UNICEF](#)

<https://www.unicef.org/media/83571/file/Global-Programme-Framework-on-Children-on-the-Move.pdf>

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LmunA 2022

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LmunA 2022

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