

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN ITALY AND GREECE

Key Findings

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Over 100,000 refugee and migrant children, of whom more than 33,800 unaccompanied and separated children (34 per cent), arrived in Europe in 2016. The vast majority of them entered Europe irregularly through the two main gateways to the continent: **Italy**, using the Central Mediterranean sea route, or **Greece**, transiting through the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey, mostly via sea.

REACH, in partnership with UNICEF, conducted an assessment between December and May 2017 to provide key missing information on the profiles and experiences of children who arrived in Italy and Greece in 2016 and 2017, why they left home, the risks children encountered on their journey and their life once in Europe.

METHODOLOGY

In Italy, a total of 720 unaccompanied and separated children were interviewed in 72 reception facilities in Sicily and outside reception facilities in the key transit sites of Rome, Milan, Ventimiglia and Como.

In Greece, a consolidated secondary data analysis was carried out, supplemented by primary data collection, including Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 40 parents and 30 service providers, as well as 17 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a total of 130 children, of whom 70 unaccompanied and separated children.



Five-year-old Omar Mahmud Hudar, a refugee from the Syrian Arab Republic, picks up garbage from pools of sewage water by his housing container at the Skaramagas refugee camp, in the port area of northern Athens, Greece, where he and his family have lived for the past year.

March 9, 2017 © UNICEF/Gilbertson

LEAVING HOME

Refugee and migrant children in Italy and Greece come from **conflict-ridden countries** and areas with **poverty**; all leave behind a situation where they feel they have **no access to their basic rights as a child** and do not see **any prospects** for themselves in the foreseeable future.

Children in Italy tend to have made the decision to migrate individually (75 per cent of interviewed children) and, as a result, embarked on the journey alone. They are mostly **unaccompanied, boys, and aged 16 to 17**, coming from a variety of **countries in West and the Horn of Africa**. In almost one third of cases studied, children decided to migrate because of **violence or problems at home**. Many children also reported to have left home due to **political, religious, or ethnic persecution** in their country of origins. Among children who left home with the intention to reach Europe (46 per cent of respondents), **access to education and respect for human rights** were important factors influencing their decision.

In contrast, **children in Greece tend to have taken a joint decision within their family** and arrive with family members (91 per cent of interviewed children), at an **almost equal level between boys and girls, and from all age groups**. Coming primarily from countries such as **Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan**, the decision to leave was mostly based on the **generalised insecurity** in their home country, which has key impact on all aspects of children's lives, including their **ability to go to school**.

THE JOURNEY

The length of the journey was often tied to children's need to work to finance their journey and, thereby, their exposure to exploitation. On average, children who arrived in Italy travelled for one year and two months between leaving home and reaching Italy. Among children in Greece, the length of travel varied significantly, but was overall shorter than for children arriving in Italy.

Less than half of children who arrived in Italy reported that they had left home with the aim of reaching Europe, meaning that children's journey were often fragmented and children often changed destination once life in the neighbouring regions was not as expected.

The majority of children traveling along the Central Mediterranean route worked throughout their journey, often in heavy physical labour and most commonly in key transit sites in Niger, Algeria or Libya. **The stay in Libya was unanimously reported as the most traumatising part of the journey by children in Italy**, except for the sea crossing. Almost half of them reported to have been kidnapped against ransom and one in four children reported to have been arbitrarily arrested and held in prison without charges.

Children in Greece were also exposed to a number of risks along the journey, including violence and exploitation. When traveling with family members, **children in both countries also reported the risk of being separated from a family member during their journey.**

ONCE IN EUROPE

All children face challenges in realising their objectives, as **access to documentation**, including asylum and residence permits, takes longer than they had anticipated and **legal pathways** are inherently slow. In the meantime, children lose out on **education** and often attempt to reach their goals through irregular means, putting themselves at risk of **abuse and exploitation**.

ACCESS TO INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

Children who want to stay in Italy or Greece and build a life for themselves there wait for months or even years to receive a legal status in country, often exposed to protection risks and abuse. In Italy, the lack of legal status means that children aged 16 or 17 are not allowed to work and risk to become increasingly marginalised and isolated in reception facilities. In Greece, uncertainty over children's legal stay and the feeling to be caught in a limbo increasingly lead to children suffering from anxiety and mental health disorders.

In both countries, the length of status determination procedures is of **particular concern for children aged 16 to 17**, as they fear they will reach adulthood before their case is determined and **risk losing the opportunity to ask for a permit of stay as minors**.

PROTECTION RISKS IN ITALY AND GREECE

In both Italy and Greece, children were found at significant risk of abuse, as they often do not understand why procedures take so long and resort to irregular means to achieve their goals. Children in Italy drop out of reception facilities and often end up living in informal gathering sites with limited access to shelter and at risk of exploitation. In Greece, protection risks and abuse, including sexual exploitation, reportedly occur both inside open accommodation sites and outside shelters in urban areas.



Mohammad, 17, bumps fists with a local Italian man he had been chatting with during an outing from a government hot spot—a reception center that doubles as a lodging station for unaccompanied minors in Pozzallo, Sicily.

May 17, 2016 © UNICEF/Gilbertson



Algerian minors and asylum seekers try to find a spot to hide as they clamber aboard a train in an attempt to make the illegal passage to central Europe at a train yard on the outskirts of Thessaloniki, Greece.

March 16, 2017 © UNICEF/Gilbertson

ACCESS TO LEGAL PATHWAYS FOR ONWARD TRAVEL

Children who arrived in Italy or Greece and decide to travel onward through legal pathways find themselves stuck in transit for months or even years while waiting for their family reunification or relocation claim to be processed. This means that children lose a lot of time in a state of limbo and, as result, become all the more likely to attempt to leave the country irregularly. This may put children at acute risk of exploitation, as they search for ways to pay for the journey northwards.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

For many children, the ability to continue their education was one of the key drivers of their journey to Europe. Yet, once they arrive in Italy and Greece, children face challenges in accessing education, which affect both children who want to stay in Italy or Greece in the longer term and those who plan to continue their journey.

For children who want to stay in Italy or Greece, limited education means that they have difficulties in integrating into society. For children who want to travel onwards, the ability to go to school is important both to bring a routine to their daily lives, as well as ensuring that children are not missing out on education as they wait for legal pathways for onward travel.

KEY AREAS OF CONCERN:

1. Limited access to international protection
2. Limited access to information
3. Limited access to legal pathways for onward travel
4. Protection concerns once in Italy and Greece
5. Need for psycho-social support
6. Limited access to education