

The “Invisible Children”: Uncertain Future of Unaccompanied Minor Migrants in Europe

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Over the last few years, several countries of the European Union (EU) have dealt with increasing numbers of unaccompanied minor migrants, mainly originating from countries experiencing armed conflicts and oppression, or abuses of human rights. These children, also defined as “separated children,”¹ are under 18 years of age, are outside their home country, apart from their parents or their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, and are traveling to Europe typically to escape conditions of serious deprivation or exploitation.¹

These children are fragile, whether physically, intellectually, or socially. They lack the care and protection of their caregivers, and may be easily exposed to abuse and neglect. Because of their particular helpless condition, the unaccompanied minor migrants are at serious risk to be further deprived of their rights, and to become de facto “invisible” to the authorities, to the public health services, and in general to the public opinion. Furthermore, when they arrive at a destination, or during their journey through Europe, many children often vanish. The full dimension of such phenomenon that further hits the unaccompanied minors along their European migration routes currently is unknown. However, the intense migration that has affected the south Mediterranean borders of the EU over the last 10 years has allowed the collection of sufficient data to raise the high concern of several European pediatric societies about the “invisible” condition of the unaccompanied migrant minors traveling through Europe, including the phenomenon of the vanishing children.

The aim of this article is to raise awareness of the “invisible children,” particularly in those countries that only recently have experienced a mass migration of populations from different endangered parts of the world.

The Case of Children Traveling to the Mediterranean Southern Sea Borders of EU

During the first 6 months of 2015, more than 106 000 children had asked for asylum to the EU.² The number of unaccompanied migrant children entering the EU was increasing. During the last 10 years and until recently, the sea coasts of Italy and Greece represented the main southern border gate for migration to Europe. Particularly in Italy,

although there were 5821 unaccompanied minors in December 2012, their number progressively rose to 6319 (>8.4%) and 10 536 (>31.7%) in 2013 and 2014, respectively (Table; available at www.jpeds.com). The majority of minor migrants were from Egypt, Albania, Gambia, Somalia, and from other unidentified regions of North and Central Africa; a smaller number was from the Middle East. Most of them are 16- to 17-year-old males (95.4% males vs 4.6% females), and 60% of them were first hosted in hospitality centers for migrants, concentrated in 4 regions (Sicily, Lazio, Lombardy, and Puglia).³ The latest available data emphasized the arrival of 9699 separated children in Italy during the period January to August 2015 (94.9% males and 5.1% females). Of them, 91.7% are 15 to 17 years old, 7.8% are 7 to 14 years of age, and 0.5% are <6 years of age.⁴

Alarming data about the destiny of many of these children have been reported by the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies.⁴ In fact, one-third of the unaccompanied minors had been lost to follow-up. The report published in September 2015 states that from the year 2012 increasing numbers of unaccompanied children had vanished after their arrival in Italy (Table). For instance, during the limited period January to August 2015, of the total number of 9699 unaccompanied children, 5588 (57.6%) had disappeared after their first registration at entry in the country.⁴ It was speculated that these children may fall victim of kidnapping, trafficking, illegal labor, sexual exploitation, or prostitution. Most notably, the percentage of female children who vanished yearly was higher than the male percentage. According to a report by “Terre des hommes,” up to 50% of the unaccompanied female minors vanish yearly.⁵

In Greece, according to data provided by the local Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection and the Ministry of Labor, in 2013, a total of 3122 unaccompanied minors were arrested by the police, 453 applied for asylum and

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1150 were placed in safe accommodation centers; the destiny of the remaining 1519 is not known. Reflecting the rising number of new arrivals in this country, in 2014 there have been 2004 housing requests, 349 of which could not be satisfied, and in June 2015 alone, 4270 children landed on the Greek Islands, 86 of them unaccompanied.^{6,7}

However, the phenomenon of the unaccompanied migrant minors also has expanded to different parts of Europe, as new migratory routes to the north of Europe have recently emerged. For instance, official data indicate that during the period 2010 to 2012, in the UK 4240 unaccompanied children claimed asylum, and over the same period only 585 former unaccompanied children departed or were removed (13.8% of the number of arrivals over the same period).⁸ The report by the UK government concludes that the gap implies that the majority of former unaccompanied children remain in the UK with an undetermined or unlawful status.⁸

In Germany, which currently is one of the main final destinations for migrants, the number of unaccompanied minors who have lodged an asylum application in 2008 was 763, rising to 2486 in 2013, an increase of 325% in just 5 years.⁹ Following the increase of the migration waves directed toward the north of Europe through new land routes, by the end of the year 2014, 147 000 refugee children lived in Germany, of whom 17 000 were unaccompanied.¹⁰

The South EU Countries as a Migratory Bridge to the North EU Countries

The children, often unaccompanied, leave their home countries and family looking for a better future and new opportunities, often escaping wars, hunger, natural disasters, human rights violations, and poverty. Some of them are just looking for protection in the EU, and others pass through the southern borders of EU heading to different destinations within the Union. Therefore, the statistical representation of minors who do not enter the asylum procedure in EU is frequently difficult and unclear, as a larger number of children consider the South European countries of first entry only a transit station to their final EU destination, rendering them “invisible” to the authorities.

At their first entry in an EU country, the unaccompanied children who are intercepted by the local authorities normally undergo identification procedures and are placed in safe environments, such as children’s home and foster care, or admitted into integration and education programs. Initially, the basic needs are provided by emergency care and assistance facilities, until new and long-term solutions are found. These may include reunification with family, custody by foster families, and admission to foster care facilities or community-based care.^{10,11} However, according to the “Save the Children” organization, several hundred unaccompanied children who entered the South European countries were stuck for weeks or months in inadequate facilities, experiencing modest social conditions, and lacking a proper protection.¹² The standards of the facilities hosting the chil-

dren are often poor and unable to provide sufficient standards of social protection, and many children prefer to escape or to continue their journey north. In both cases, they disappear from government shelters and become exposed to a variety of risks.

Furthermore, many of these children also need to work in order to send money to their families or to repay the debt they incurred on their journey to Europe. Therefore, they tend to accept any kind work, even when such work is illegal, dangerous, and underpaid, and often become victims of sexual exploitation, forced labor, prostitution, and forced to perform illegal jobs.¹³

Unaccompanied Migrant Children’s Rights

Unaccompanied migrant minors have the same rights as national children, and are legally protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child signed by a multiplicity of United Nations member nations, including all EU countries.^{14,15} All separated children have the right to be clothed, fed, and accommodated, and to receive proper health care, to be educated, and to be informed in a language they understand. Overall, they must be given the opportunity to thrive and to achieve their full potentials.^{1,16} However, the local full implementation of the Convention seems to represent a major issue for the signees.

Furthermore, in accordance to the directions of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, it is important that all caregivers working in contact with unaccompanied migrant children receive appropriate information and training in order for them to provide proper assistance to this particular group of children.¹⁶

Conclusions

Reaching destinations in Europe has become dangerous for unaccompanied children. These migrant minors tend to avoid official protection programs and may abandon the government shelters. Their particularly weak social condition renders them often “invisible” to the authorities and bureaucracy and unknown to public opinion. These socially fragile children are exposed to exploitation, violence, abuse, neglect, and to the alarming phenomenon of vanishing. The European Pediatric Association–Union of National European Pediatric Societies and Associations would like to raise the awareness of the pediatric community on this matter because the national societies of pediatrics may play a significant role in helping to contain the negative outcomes of this phenomenon by activating dedicated task forces. ■

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Table. Unaccompanied minor migrants and vanished unaccompanied minor migrants registered in Italy over the period 2012-2015

Period	Total unaccompanied minor migrants	Vanished unaccompanied minor migrants
2012 (Jan-Dec)	5821	1754 (30.1%)
2013 (Jan-Dec)	6319	2142 (33.9%)
2014 (Jan-Dec)	10 536	3707 (35.2%)
2015 (Jan-Sept)	9699	5588 (57.6%)