

# A seriously flawed system - Europe's quiet crisis: 'missing' migrant children

Monday 9 May 2016, by [MUCCI Alberto](#), [PARAVICINI Giugliulia](#) (Date first published: 3 May 2016).

**The system is failing the thousands of unaccompanied children crossing onto the Continent.**

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MALMÖ, Sweden — The closure of European borders and lack of an effective strategy to cope with wave after wave of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere often leave unaccompanied minors crossing into Europe with nowhere to turn. And that makes them easy prey for smugglers and traffickers.

In theory, the EU has strict and binding rules for member countries when it comes to asylum seekers, especially unaccompanied children. In practice, the system is seriously flawed because member countries fail to share information, EU institutions disagree on how to update asylum laws, and national systems differ on how to handle cases involving children.

Europol, the EU law enforcement agency, sounded the alert in January, saying 10,000 migrant children were unaccounted for across the continent. Many were working for gangs on construction sites and in farmers' fields — picking asparagus in Germany during the spring, tomatoes in Italy in the summer, and grapes in Spain in the fall, said Robert Crepinko, head of the agency's European Migrant Smuggling Centre.

"I'm alarmed by recent Europol figures .... children traveling on their own run a high risk of being exploited by criminal gangs for human trafficking, sex work or slavery. This situation violates Europe's fundamental rights and the rights of the child," Věra Jourová, the European commissioner for justice, told POLITICO.

*"I have gone underground since the asylum bid was rejected so the police can't find me and kick me out" — Asif, 17, from Afghanistan*

However, the 10,000 figure is on the conservative side, according to many national governments, Interpol and NGOs.

"The situation is serious, the number of missing children is most probably much higher and the problem needs to be addressed with absolute care if we are really concerned about the welfare of these children," Michael Moran, assistant director of Interpol's Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Unit, said.

## **The long journey**

Sitting on a battered old couch in the Ensamkommandes Förbund center for unaccompanied minors in Malmö, 17-year-old Asif daydreams — about sneakers.

“I was hoping to get a new pair of Nike shoes today,” Asif, originally from Afghanistan, said. “But I am [size] 41 and they only have number 42 today. Maybe next time.”

The atmosphere in the center is friendly. There are language classes — Swedish and English — and people coming in and out with clothes and books. A middle-aged woman keeps the coffee and tea flowing. The center is mostly staffed by volunteers, although it receives some state funding.

Like thousands of other minors, Asif decided to leave Afghanistan for a better life in Europe. Asif’s uncle forced him to join the army because the family needed the money. He was just 15. It didn’t go well; a few weeks into his service he was shot in the leg by the Taliban and spent two months in hospital.

In 2014 he left hospital and decided to head to Sweden, believing it to be the European country where he would receive the best treatment. Ten countries and four people-smugglers later, he arrived and applied for asylum, but the application was rejected.

*“We always thought of migrants as men and now we see they are also unaccompanied minors” — Yves Pascou, European Policy Center*

“I have gone underground since the asylum bid was rejected so the police can’t find me and kick me out,” said Asif, who asked for his surname to be withheld because of his legal status. “So right now I’m just waiting. I can’t work and I can’t go to school to learn Swedish; it’s a bad situation and Europe is not helping us.”

The migration center helps the children stay “underground” by asking no questions about its clients’ legal status.

## **Problems at every turn**

One of the main problems hampering the EU’s handling of asylum cases is that member countries and MEPs are at loggerheads over plans to overhaul the Dublin regulation — under which asylum claims must be processed in the country through which the applicant entered the EU. It is understandably unpopular with those countries on the frontline of the migration crisis, such as Greece and Italy.

“What we couldn’t agree on is the tragic procedure whereby children were sent back and forth from Europe as if they were packages,” Cecilia Wikström, a Swedish Liberal MEP, said.

Even though there’s been no legislative agreement, changes are forthcoming. Following a European Court of Justice ruling, countries “where the minor is present” after lodging the asylum application will be responsible for processing the claim, starting next month.

Yves Pascou, director of migration and mobility policies at the European Policy Center, a think tank, said the biggest problem is that the system is not designed to deal with children: “We always thought of migrants as men and now we see they are also unaccompanied minors.”

According to the United Nations' refugee agency, 35 percent of migrants who have entered the EU in 2016 are children, many of them traveling without an adult. That's up from 31 percent in 2015.

In 2015, 88,265 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in the EU [1], three times as many as in 2014. Nearly half of those were from Afghanistan, while 13 percent were from Syria.

Problems with dealing with asylum requests at the EU level are mirrored by problems in national parliaments.

In Italy, Sandra Zampa from Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party told POLITICO she proposed a law for managing unaccompanied minors back in 2013, but it has been waiting for approval by the parliament's budgetary committee ever since.

"This, I think, suggests nobody really wants to be responsible for the situation and this is unacceptable," Zampa said.

In Sweden, there is no single authority responsible for looking after migrant children. The migration office is responsible for the child when he or she arrives at the border, but not afterwards. Social workers take over if the child is put into their care, and police rarely make an effort to find children who have gone missing.

"The head of the Malmö border police once told me 'we only look for the missing refugees whose asylum request has been rejected, as those are the ones we want to find.' They simply don't care much," Katja Wagner, co-author of a book on refugees, said.

Sources who asked to remain anonymous said it isn't in authorities' interest to find the missing children as it costs more to look after minors than adults. According to Europol, in Italy the cost of looking after a migrant child is €45 per day plus an extra €9 a day to cover schooling, language classes and other activities to help with integration, while an adult only costs €35 a day.

## **Information muddle**

Legislative impasses and bureaucratic issues at the EU level are made worse by a lack of information sharing by European authorities.

According to Interpol data obtained by POLITICO, the total number of "yellow notices," a code by which international authorities identify missing people, was 2,814 in 2014 — 29 percent of which were about children. That's way below Europol's 10,000 figure — and Interpol's figure covers all missing children, not just migrants.

"What this means," said Interpol's Moran, "is that some member states are not reporting the missing minors to Interpol's database as they should be doing. The filing is not systematic and if member states want to solve the situation they need to get serious about it."

Padre Mengoli, a priest from Bologna, runs a center for migrant children. He explained how the system works: "Let's say an unaccompanied minor enters Italy. He or she is placed in what is called 'first reception.' Let's also say he escapes and makes it all the way to Germany. If, and I say if, the center reports the missing child to the Italian police, the police should then update the international database so all authorities know about this child. If they don't do that, and if the minor is eventually found and reported as found in Germany, he is still officially missing according to Italian authority databases. It's a mess."

“I preferred asking for asylum in Hungary as a minor than in Greece as an adult, but it was useless. To escape, I had to find a smuggler to bring me to Austria” — Asif  
The situation isn’t helped — and the figures are skewed — by many migrant children lying about their age to avoid red tape.

Giovanna Di Benedetto, a spokesperson for the charity Save the Children, said: “From what we have witnessed in Greece the real numbers could be even higher than the ones reported by official statistics because a lot of minors are registered as adults when they cross the border.”

Asif lied about his age at the border. He was 16 when he crossed into Greece but told officials he was 21, signed the paperwork and entered the EU: “I didn’t want to be put in a place for minors for months in Greece. I said 21 and they just let me go.”

A few months later he was stopped by authorities in Hungary and tried to explain that he was actually 16, not 21. He feared being sent back to Greece, where he was registered on arrival and which, under Dublin rules, should manage his asylum case.

But no one believed him. “I tried to explain my situation again and again because I preferred asking for asylum in Hungary as a minor than in Greece as an adult, but it was useless. To escape, I had to find a smuggler to bring me to Austria in order to continue my trip as an adult.”

“We must deal with this issue right now. First on the migratory route, combating the trafficking and smuggling of children has to be a priority for EU agencies such as Europol and Eurojust [the judicial co-operation agency],” said Jourová, adding that the asylum application process needs to be as short as possible to avoid the risk of children going off the radar.

But the migrant children keep arriving. According to the European Asylum Support Office, in January and February 6,133 applications were filed by unaccompanied minors seeking protection in Europe. Many of those will join the list of the missing.

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## **P.S.**

\* “Europe’s quiet crisis: ‘missing’ migrant children”. Politico.eu. 5/3/16, 5:34 AM CET:  
<http://www.politico.eu/article/going-underground-europes-lost-migrant-children/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7244677/3-02052016-AP-EN.pdf/19cfd8d1-330b-4080-8ff3-72ac7b7b67f6>