



# UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN:

# 5 facts

## 1. The number of unaccompanied and separated children on the move around the globe is unknown.

There is no comprehensive global figure for unaccompanied and separated children who migrate internationally, are displaced or seek international protection. Though efforts have been made to predict and estimate family separation over the last decades to meet the urgent needs of this child population,<sup>1</sup> current national and global estimates likely fall far short of capturing the true scale of children's movement.

Due to vast gaps in global tracking, data from 2024 on child refugees and asylum-seekers who are on their own were limited to 86 of 181 countries where UNHCR reports statistics,<sup>2</sup> capturing just a portion of the total population of unaccompanied and separated children. Regional data coverage is highly uneven, with Europe, Africa and North America contributing the majority of reported figures (see fact 2). Asia and Latin America – regions with significant populations of children on the move – are concerning underrepresented in official statistics.

Addressing these data deficiencies is critical to fortifying the protective environment for these highly vulnerable children and to guiding an effective response that supports and empowers them.



Only **48%** of countries where UNHCR reports statistics have data on refugee and asylum-seeking children travelling alone



### Call for data

Accurate and standardized data on unaccompanied and separated children and family reunification is needed in every national statistical system.



## 2. As route-specific data show, children travelling without a parent or caregiver make up a concerning proportion of all children on the move. Children travelling unaccompanied or becoming separated during the journey are also regularly documented among migrant and displaced populations.

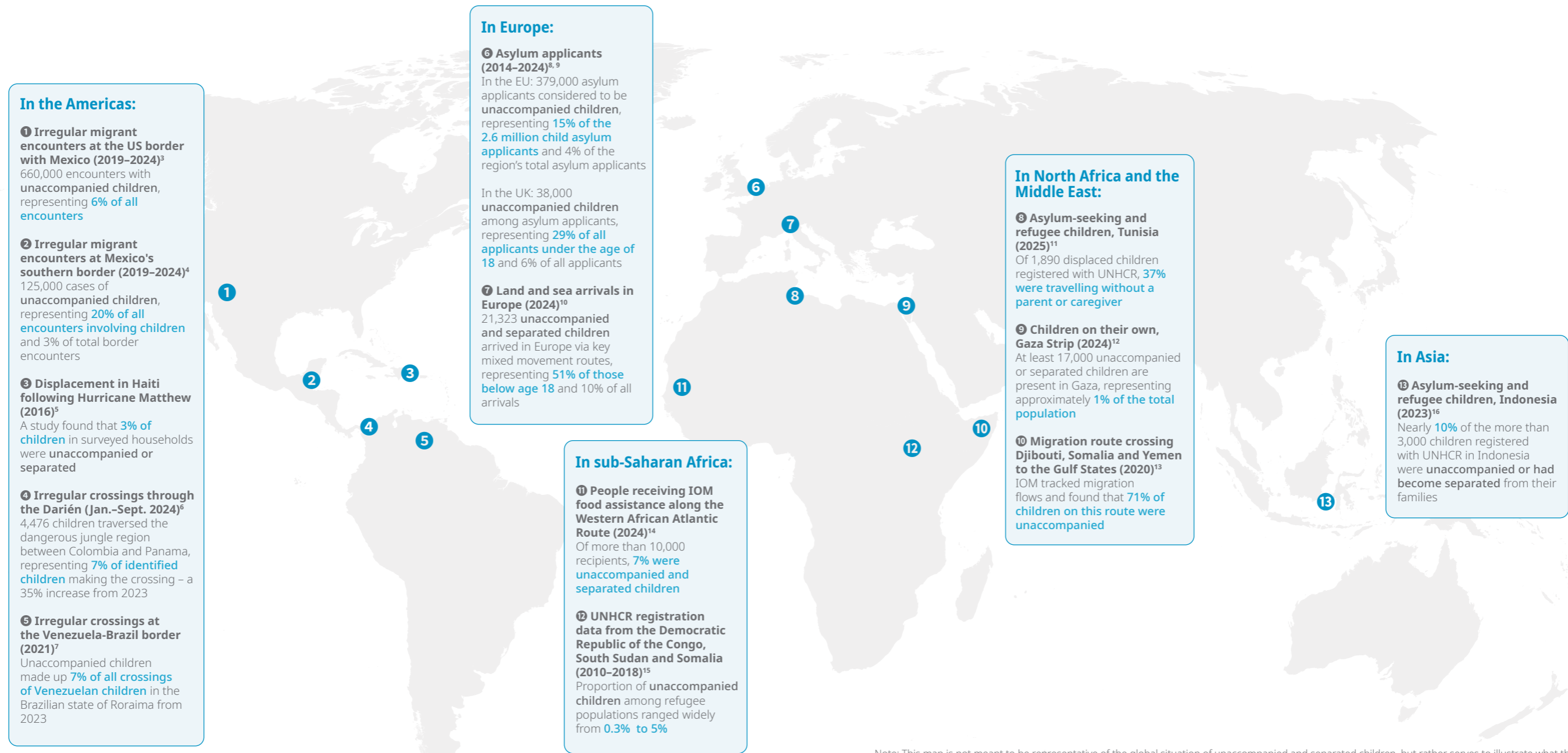
Data from key mixed movement flows indicate that a troubling number of children are on the move without a parent or caregiver, in some cases representing a significant share of migrant and displaced children. Regional data and statistics on displaced populations – such as asylum applicants – also consistently indicate the presence of unaccompanied and separated children.

Available data, however, likely represent only a small part of the global population of unaccompanied and separated children. For instance, route-based analysis is unavailable for many of the world's busiest corridors, such as movements from Venezuela or Syria. It is likely that many children are making these journeys alone and are missing from the current evidence base.



### Call for data

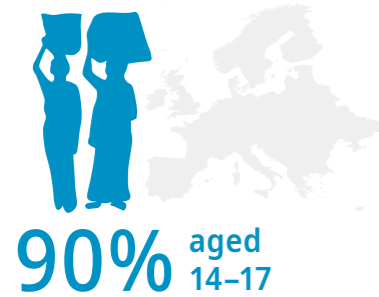
Harmonized data collection and standardized methodologies and indicators across countries and along mixed movement routes is critical for tracking children's movements and protection needs across borders.



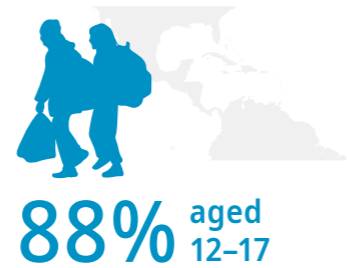
Note: This map is not meant to be representative of the global situation of unaccompanied and separated children, but rather serves to illustrate what the available data indicate about their proportion among populations on the move. The percentages are based on a wide range of denominators and are therefore not directly comparable. Source: United States CBP, 2025; Mexico Secretariat of the Interior, 2025; Jensen et al., 2018; UNICEF Panama, 2018; UNICEF Brasil and the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, 2023; Eurostat, 2025; United Kingdom Home Office, 2025; UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, 2025; UNHCR, 2025; UNICEF, 2024; IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa, 2021; IOM, 2025; De Matteis et al., 2025; UNHCR, 2023.

### 3. Existing data indicate that adolescents consistently make up the majority of children on the move alone. Quality data on key dimensions like age and sex, however, remain sparse.

In countries and regions where data are available, adolescents represent the largest proportion by age of the unaccompanied and separated child population. But emerging evidence points to a recent increase in the share of younger children travelling unaccompanied.<sup>17</sup>



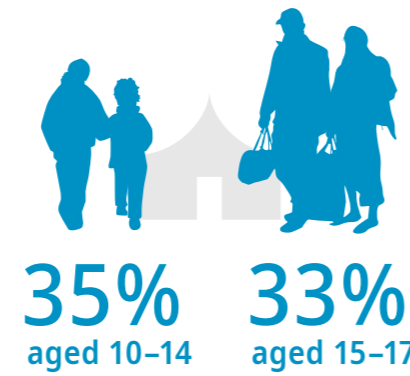
of the 380,000 asylum applicants in the EU classified as unaccompanied children from 2014 to mid-2025 were between the ages of 14 and 17<sup>18</sup>



of children on the move alone along Mexico's southern border in 2024 were between 12 and 17 years old<sup>20</sup>



of unaccompanied and separated children captured in 2024 arrivals data from five southern European countries were aged 15–17 years<sup>19</sup>



of unaccompanied and separated children supported by UNICEF in humanitarian settings in 2024 were aged 10–14 and 15–17 years, respectively<sup>21</sup>



#### Call for data

Strategic investment in disaggregated data is critical for understanding the varied experiences of children on the move and developing evidence-based responses. This includes analysing how different drivers of movement influence population demographics and contribute to family separation.



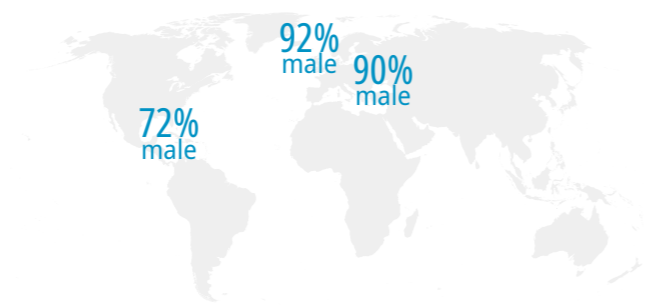
## 4. Gendered differences in the numbers, experiences, motivations and vulnerabilities of children travelling alone are evident throughout the migration process.

A child's gender significantly shapes mobility trends, patterns and outcomes. Available evidence suggests that boys are more likely to be on the move alone than girls, travel farther from home and cross international borders, while girls who travel alone often move within their own country or region.<sup>22</sup>

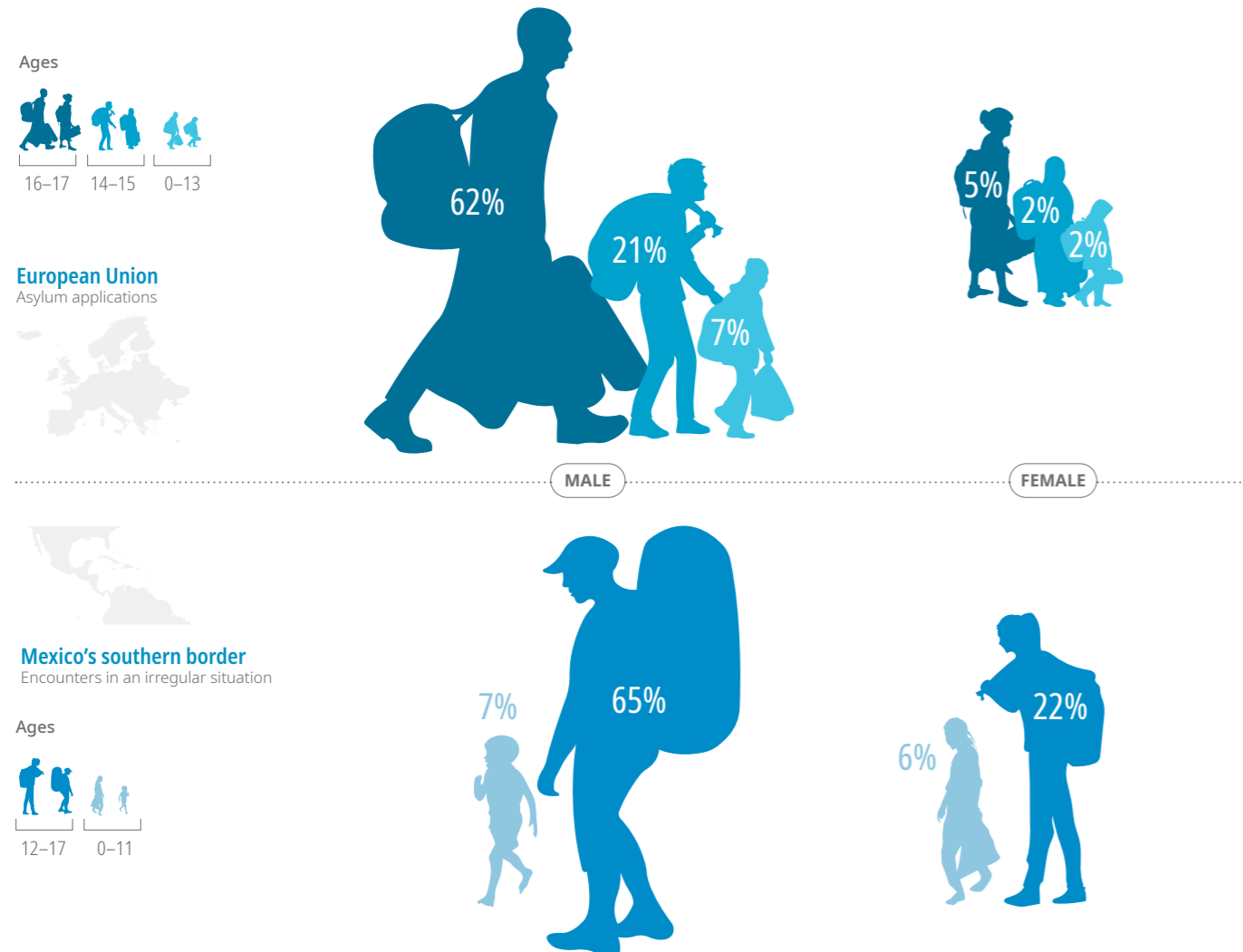
Between 2014 and 2024, a significant majority of unaccompanied child asylum applicants were male, accounting for 90 per cent in the EU,<sup>23</sup> 92 per cent in the United Kingdom<sup>24</sup> and 72 per cent of those encountered at Mexico's southern border.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, most unaccompanied children arriving in the United States of America were male.<sup>26</sup>

Percentage of male unaccompanied child asylum applicants



Age and sex distribution of asylum applicants in the EU considered to be unaccompanied (n=32,230) and events of unaccompanied children found in irregular situation in Mexico (n=6,203) in 2024



These dynamics may, however, vary by context. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, high demand for domestic workers and limited economic opportunities at home drive many women and girls to seek employment abroad.<sup>27</sup>



working in less visible sectors such as domestic work

In 2019, for instance, females accounted for 70 per cent of Indonesia's temporary labour migration.<sup>28</sup> While age-disaggregated data are limited, many of these migrant domestic workers are likely to be girls.<sup>29</sup>



arriving within groups and appearing to be part of a family

Unaccompanied and separated girls are likely to be missing from the data for a number of reasons, which include:<sup>30, 31, 32</sup>



being coerced or instructed by traffickers or smugglers to claim that they are over 18 years old



### Call for data

*Gender-responsive approaches must be integrated across the entire data ecosystem – from collection and analysis through to outputs and policy recommendations – supported by comprehensive training for all data stakeholders.*



## 5. Crises can significantly and rapidly increase the number of unaccompanied and separated children.

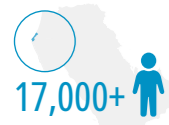
Crises – including armed conflict, economic instability, disasters and political repression – often lead to a sharp rise in the number of migrant and displaced children on their own. These emergencies force a large number of children to flee alone, either after losing family members, being separated during displacement or being sent away by parents seeking to protect them from forced recruitment, persecution or violence.



Since the outbreak of the **war in Sudan** in 2023 and up to early 2025, more than 4,300 Sudanese children on the move without a parent or caregiver have been registered with UNHCR.<sup>33</sup>



The **conflict in Yemen** has had devastating impacts on children's lives, with at least 1,200 unaccompanied children living in displacement in 2018.<sup>34</sup>



In the **Gaza Strip**, UNICEF estimated in 2024 that at least 17,000 children – or 1 per cent of Gaza's total population – were displaced and unaccompanied or separated from their families.<sup>35</sup>



**Climate change** is also emerging as a factor that exacerbates the drivers of migration in emergency settings,<sup>36</sup> although the full extent of this relationship for children on the move alone has yet to be documented.<sup>37</sup>



**Crisis typically interacts with other drivers of movement.** The interplay of violence, food insecurity and deterioration of infrastructure and public services has been tied to patterns of migration and displacement among Venezuelan children.<sup>38</sup>



A 2016 study in **Central America's Northern Triangle** found that one in three interviewed unaccompanied children cited more than one reason for migrating, such as better economic or educational opportunities, family reunification and escaping violence.<sup>39</sup>



A 2021 qualitative study in the **Horn of Africa** found that three of four children and young people migrate for a mix of reasons: some primarily for economic opportunities, others out of concern for their safety and security, and many due to a combination of factors.<sup>40</sup>



### Call for data

*Data collection must keep pace with rapidly evolving situations through real-time monitoring and early warning systems that anticipate displacement flows and secondary movements. Timely, progressive data collection – complemented by big data analytics – enables organizations to move from reactive responses to proactive protection of the most vulnerable children.*



## REFERENCES

- 1 Easton-Calabria, Evan, and Laurent Chapuis, 'Identifying Rates of Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Humanitarian Settings: Research synthesis and next steps', Internal brief, UNICEF, New York, 2025.
- 2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *unpublished data*.
- 3 United States Customs and Border Protection, 'Southwest Land Border Encounters', 12 August 2025, <[www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters](http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters)>, accessed 18 September 2025.
- 4 Migration Policy Unit, *Boletín mensual de estadística migratoria*, Mexico Secretariat of the Interior, Mexico City, August 2025.
- 5 Jensen, Celina, et al., *A Population-Based Estimation in Haiti Following Hurricane Matthew*, Save the Children, London, 2018.
- 6 UNICEF Panama, 'Crece el número de niños, niñas y adolescentes que transitan por Darién solos: UNICEF', 18 December 2018, <<https://www.unicef.org/panama/comunicados-prensa/crece-el-n%C3%BAmero-de-ni%C3%B1os-ni%C3%B1as-y-adolescentes-que-transitan-por-dari%C3%A9n-solos>>, accessed 23 September 2025.
- 7 UNICEF Brasil and the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, *Guia para a proteção de crianças e adolescentes desacompanhadas/os, separadas/os e indocumentadas/os no Brasil*, UNICEF, Brasília, December 2023.
- 8 Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants Considered to Be Unaccompanied Minors by Citizenship, Age and Sex – Annual data', September 2025, <[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr\\_asyunaa/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyunaa/default/table?lang=en)>, accessed 23 October 2025; and 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex – Annual aggregated data', September 2025, <[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr\\_asyappctza/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyappctza/default/table?lang=en)>, accessed 23 October 2025.
- 9 United Kingdom Home Office, 'Asylum and Resettlement: Historic datasets – Asylum applications, initial decisions and resettlement', March 2023, <[www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets)>, accessed 18 September 2025.
- 10 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund and the International Organization for Migration, 'Migrant and Refugee Children via Mixed Migration Routes in Europe: Accompanied, unaccompanied and separated – Overview of Trends, 2024', UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, Geneva, 15 September 2025.
- 11 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Operational Data Portal', n.d., <<https://data.unhcr.org/>>, accessed 18 September 2025.
- 12 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Stories of Loss and Grief: At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents in the Gaza Strip', Remarks by UNICEF State of Palestine Chief of Communication Jonathan Crickx, Geneva, 2 February 2024, <[www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or](http://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or)>, accessed 18 September 2025.
- 13 IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa, *A Region on the Move: 2020 mobility overview in the East and Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula*, International Organization for Migration, Nairobi, 2021.
- 14 International Organization for Migration, *Bilan annuel OIM Maroc: Résultats clés 2024*, International Organization for Migration, Rabat, 2025.
- 15 De Matteis, Alessandro, et al., 'Separation During Emergencies: Is there a stable relationship between separated children and the rest of a fleeing population? Evidence from three situations in Africa', *International Migration Review*, vol. 59, no. 2, June 2025, pp. 825–849.
- 16 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Fact Sheet: Indonesia', UNHCR, Jakarta, December 2023.
- 17 Office of Refugee Resettlement, 'Data', United States Department of Health and Human Services, 11 September 2025, <<https://acf.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data>>, accessed 18 September 2025.
- 18 'Asylum Applicants Considered to Be Unaccompanied Minors by Citizenship, Age and Sex' and 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex'.
- 19 'Migrant and Refugee Children via Mixed Migration Routes in Europe'.
- 20 *Boletín mensual de estadística migratoria*.
- 21 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Strategic Plan and Core Standard Indicators Dashboards: Indicador 3.2.6', Internal database, accessed 17 September 2025.
- 22 Temin, Miriam, et al., *Girls on the Move: Adolescent girls & migration in the developing world – A Girls Count report on adolescent girls*, Population Council, New York, 2013; van de Glind, Hans, 'Migration and Child Labour: Exploring child migrant vulnerabilities and those of children left behind', Working paper, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2010.
- 23 'Asylum Applicants Considered to Be Unaccompanied Minors by Citizenship, Age and Sex' and 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex'. Percentages do not add up to 100% because the sex is unknown for less than 1% of the population.
- 24 'Asylum and Resettlement: Historic datasets'.
- 25 *Boletín mensual de estadística migratoria*.
- 26 Office of Refugee Resettlement, 'Data'.
- 27 International Organization for Migration, *Supporting Brighter Futures: Young women and girls and labour migration in South-East Asia and the Pacific*, IOM, Geneva, 2019.
- 28 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *A Review of Indonesian Emigrants*, Talent Abroad, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2022.
- 29 Human Rights Watch, *Help Wanted: Abuses against female migrant domestic workers in Indonesia and Malaysia*, HRW, New York, 2004.
- 30 Fritsch, Cerise, Elissa Johnson and Aurelija Juska, 'The Plight of Zimbabwean Unaccompanied Refugee Minors in South Africa: A call for comprehensive legislative action', *Denver Journal of International Law & Policy*, vol. 38, no. 4, Fall 2009–2010, art. 3.
- 31 Gelineau, Kristen, and Niniek Karmini, 'Lost Girls of Indonesia among 61k Dead and Missing Migrants', Associated Press, 13 December 2018, <<https://apnews.com/article/8c32f963c8a44838bf822e5133db62a8>>, accessed 18 September 2025.
- 32 United Nations Children's Fund, *Making the Invisible Visible: The identification of unaccompanied and separated girls in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia*, UNICEF, Geneva, March 2020.
- 33 Rifaah, Nawar, 'From Separation to Safety: Rebuilding childhood after Sudan's war', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 17 April 2025, <[www.unhcr.org/eg/news/stories/separation-safety-rebuilding-childhood-after-sudan-s-war](http://www.unhcr.org/eg/news/stories/separation-safety-rebuilding-childhood-after-sudan-s-war)>, accessed 18 September 2025.
- 34 International Organization for Migration, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *2018 Yemen Multi-Cluster Location Assessment*, IOM, UNHCR and OCHA, 17 April 2019.
- 35 'Stories of Loss and Grief'.
- 36 International Committee of the Red Cross, *When Rain Turns to Dust: Understanding and responding to the combined impact of armed conflicts and the climate and environment crisis on people's lives*, ICRC, Geneva, July 2020.
- 37 International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, *Climate Mobility and Childhood: Examining the risks, closing the data and evidence gaps for children on the move*, United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2024.
- 38 Marcus, Rachel, et al., *Children on the Move in Latin America and the Caribbean: Review of the evidence*, United Nations Children's Fund, Panama City, 2023.
- 39 Lorenzen, Matthew, 'The Mixed Motives of Unaccompanied Child Migrants From Central America's Northern Triangle', *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, vol. 5, no. 4, December 2017, pp. 744–767.
- 40 Hovil, Lucy, et al., *Reimagining Migration Responses: Learning from children and young people who move in the Horn of Africa*, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, Italy, 2021.

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2025.

'Unaccompanied and Separated Children: 5 facts' was extracted from the 2025 IDAC report, *Alone, On the Move and Unseen: Spotlighting the urgent needs of unaccompanied and separated children*. Read the full report here.

### Photo credits:

Page 1: © UNICEF/UNI644466/Hazori  
 Page 2: © UNHCR/Ala Kheir  
 Page 6: © UNICEF/UN0747643/Zehbrauskas  
 Page 8: © UNICEF/UN0623473/Catu  
 Page 9: © UNICEF/UNI837626/Rajab  
 Page 10: © UNICEF/UN0632753/Gilbertson VII Photo



### IDAC PLEDGES TO...



**STRENGTHEN**  
data systems  
and capacities



**PROMOTE**  
and establish  
collaboration  
and innovation



**IMPROVE**  
data visibility,  
availability,  
accessibility  
and usability

## FOR BETTER LIVES FOR CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Contact us at [IDAC@unicef.org](mailto:IDAC@unicef.org)  
 Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [YouTube](#)  
 IDAC