

Executive Summary



**“WHEREVER WE GO,
SOMEONE DOES US HARM”**

Violence against refugee and migrant children
arriving in Europe through the Balkans



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Save the Children



Hungary

Slovenia

Croatia

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Serbia

Romania

Montenegro

Kosovo*

North Macedonia

Bulgaria

Albania

Greece



Türkiye



The map illustrates migration movement of children from the countries of South and West Asia who are travelling to Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans Route.

The map does not illustrate other existing migration routes to Europe, and does not represent any official endorsement of borders.





Research Methodology

The research was conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, key transit countries on the threshold of the European Union and on the way to Western Europe. It is based on in-depth interviews with 48 children aged between 13 and 19 years old, including 30 unaccompanied boys, and 8 boys and 10 girls travelling with their families or close relatives. Interviews were carried out by field researchers, supported by interpreters and cultural mediators, according to an ethical protocol that ensured children's voices were heard in a safe and respectful way.

This report also draws on focus group discussions with 27 professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, mostly field workers who had extensive experience working with refugee and migrant children, and an extensive literature review. The findings of this research were analyzed thematically and interpreted within several keys: using ecological systems theory, an approach based on the rights of the child, and on trauma and resilience-based knowledge.

Children, including thousands of unaccompanied and separated children, **make up about one-third of all refugees and migrants arriving in Europe**. A significant percentage of these children come through the Balkans route, travelling through countries including Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These are seen as transit countries by refugees and migrants, as they try to continue their way towards Western Europe.

In 2015 alone, about half a million refugees and other migrants, mainly from South and Western Asia, crossed the countries on the Balkans route. Since 2016, however, the **policies and practices of the European Union and national governments in Balkan countries have sought to deter refugee and migrant arrivals in Europe**. These policies have reduced – but not stopped – the arrival of refugees, and have **dramatically increased their vulnerability and exposure to violence**.

In this report, Save the Children and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Sarajevo present **in-depth research** into the level and types of **violence that children experience while attempting to reach Western Europe via the Balkans route**, the circumstances of that violence, and the policies and practices that exist to support children.

They also make recommendations for governments, NGOs and other stakeholders, to strengthen the protection and support available to these children.



Every child who participated in this research recounted being subjected to physical, psychological, sexual or other types of violence, directly or indirectly. This violence occurred in their country of origin, during their journey, when crossing borders, in reception, asylum and detention centres, in squats, in the street and in the workplace.



Names used in this report

To protect their privacy, each child who took part in this research was encouraged to choose a name that they would like to be used to refer to them in this research. All children's names used in this report are the names that the children chose for themselves.

I VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN ON THE BALKANS ROUTE

On average, **the children interviewed for this study said they had been travelling for 4 years.**

Along the way, they experienced, witnessed and heard accounts of multiple types of violence.



Police and border guard violence against children

The most common violence reported by children was physical violence by border police officers. This occurred along the entire Balkans route, most often during children's attempts to cross informal border crossings only to be violently expelled in so-called 'pushbacks.' Interviewed children describe being stripped naked, forced to stand in the cold, and being given electric shocks and beatings with sticks, which led to serious physical injuries such as fractures or severe contusions.

Most of the children have tried to cross the border from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia more than three times, with the largest number of attempts recorded being nine. **There is a visible tendency for children's anxiety and fear to grow as their number of unsuccessful attempts to cross the border increases.**

Children call these attempts to cross borders the 'game.' Preparations for departure generally take a long time; children and families collect food and money and then walk in the dark, usually through the woods or other difficult terrain, for several kilometres until they reach the border.

According to the children, if border police spot and apprehend them, they commonly confiscate their belongings, beat them, use derogatory words and make them return on foot, with no clothes, food, money, mobile phones or other personal items.

Some interviewed children mentioned gunshots, while several children said that those who beat them the hardest were police officers wearing black masks; some children referred to them as 'commandos', saying '...they look like mafia... carrying knives.'

Violent behaviour by police was not limited to preventing children's attempts to cross the border. Although children tended to differentiate between the police in cities, who may offer some protection and 'only' extort money and ask for bribes, and the police in charge of deportation, who would subject them to beatings in the same manner as border police.

Violence perpetrated by people smugglers and their assistants, peers and others

More than 1 in 3 interviewed children described violence at the hands of smugglers and their fear of them. Smugglers commonly beat children on the road when they start lagging behind or when they are loud or 'disobedient'. Several children testified that the smugglers would kill or leave adults and children in conditions that they would not be able to survive on their own, because they could not physically withstand the journey, they were hurt or sick, or did not have the money to continue the journey.

"Wherever we go, someone does us harm. We sort of don't have any emotions any more. We cannot filter this."

Hanan, boy, 17



"We were apprehended by the police. They told us to sit down, and we all sat down; then they selected two people in the group and beat them... Then they told us, come on, let's go, towards some road. We started moving, one of them stood to the side with a rod, told us to go in a single file, and as people passed him by, he hit them."

Basit, boy, 16



"When they [children] make noise, or when they don't listen to him [the smuggler], he just slaps and slaps them. They should not make noise, disturb or disrespect someone older than them."

Omar, boy, 13



Alongside smugglers ('agents') were their assistants, pathfinders, accommodation providers and local drivers. **Children also met kidnappers and bandits on their journey.** Four out of the 48 children interviewed said they had been kidnapped for ransom, and several respondents described child kidnappings on the road and the ways in which these were carried out.

While perpetrators of violence are most commonly police and smugglers and their accomplices, other adults and children can also be a threat. Although children themselves rarely speak about peer violence – it was reported only by the three youngest boys who were interviewed – professionals in focus groups described peer violence as one of the dominant forms of violence among children, and professionals working in the field report significant prevalence of peer violence in reception centres. The different perceptions of children and professionals about the scope and intensity of peer violence, may indicate children's inability to recognise certain behaviours as violent and their readiness to accept peer violence as part of everyday life.

Sexual abuse and violence

Although no interviewed child said that they had been a victim of sexual abuse themselves, **almost two-thirds listed one or more incidents where they recognised or witnessed sexual abuse of a child** in their immediate environment, including the violent separation of girls or boys that smugglers then abused sexually.

Interviewed children said that **in exchange for sexual services, smugglers bribed them** with money, privileged status compared to others travelling with them, protection, or a 'free' pass across the border. According to children's accounts, this practice is prevalent on the Balkans route, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where children stop after a long and arduous journey without the means to continue safely.

Smugglers and other **predators on the migration route stalk children of both sexes**, particularly those in especially vulnerable situations. Children travelling with families are exposed to this kind of violence, as well as unaccompanied children. However, children interviewed in this research predominantly talked about **unaccompanied boys as the victims of sexual abuse happening along the journey.**

Sexual abuse of children is a taboo subject that is very often concealed, even from close relatives. Children interviewed on the Balkans route deny it, or sometimes normalise it as an expected abuse of power, making this kind of violence particularly difficult to identify.

Psychological violence

Every child that was interviewed described being either threatened, blackmailed, humiliated or insulted by smugglers, police officers and members of the local population. Four out of the 48 children said they were abducted for ransom on the route, and several other children witnessed kidnappings or knew children who were kidnapped on the migration route.

Children also faced ethnic, religious and other forms of discrimination that they recognise and perceive to be unjust and degrading, while on the Balkans route.

The girl was yelling, trying to save herself, but that smuggler sexually abused her, we saw it."

Hasnen, boy, 15



Economic exploitation and child labour

Along the journey, **many children of different ages reported that they had to work**, especially those older than 10 years old and unaccompanied boys. Children see this labour as inevitable and necessary, as they need to make money to continue their journey.

Children report that they were **most often involved in labour in countries where they had stayed for longer**, after the agreement between the European Union and Türkiye in 2016. In Türkiye, the children worked in factories and in Greece, they worked on farms.

Almost one in three interviewed children witnessed recruitment for activities by smugglers, primarily related to border crossings and, far less frequently, for selling drugs.

The conditions children work in are often unsuitable, inhumane and prohibited by international conventions regulating child labour.¹ Children sometimes work long shifts, even for up to 14 hours, in dangerous conditions that have consequences for their physical and mental health and severe effects on their development. People who employ children blackmail them by postponing their wages, paying them far less in wages than other workers who are in a regular position, or not paying them at all.

In addition to dangerous work, the interviewed children reported that some refugee and migrant children are engaged in other forms of the **worst types of child labour, including commercial sexual exploitation and begging**.



"Me, my brother who is younger, even the youngest one who's 11 years old, we went picking fruit from morning to evening."

Gul, girl, 19



How boys and girls experience violence in different ways

There are far fewer girls than boys on the Balkans route and they are rarely unaccompanied. Girls mostly travel with parents, brothers and sisters, and often with husbands and children of their own.

Boys interviewed for the research more commonly reported being subjected to physical violence themselves and were more often **subject to economic exploitation** and child labour, particularly if they were unaccompanied.

"You get a smuggler and when you're changing locations, you have to stay at that smuggler's apartment or accommodation for two days before you head out, and that type of abuse mostly happens during that time. It is mostly against girls travelling with a brother or travelling with a sister, for example."

Gul, girl, 19



¹ Including the Convention of the International Labour Organization no. 138 on the minimal age for employment from 1973, Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989, Convention of the International Labour Organization no. 182 on the worst forms of child labour from 1999.

Although cases of physical violence against girls and women have been described in other reports about refugees and migrants on the Balkans route, **the girls who participated** in this research **mainly witnessed violence** towards members of their families, and were **subject to humiliation** and insults. Nearly all children said that it is much harder for girls in puberty and women than men, mostly because they are considered physically frail, quickly get tired and lack the energy to suffer hunger and cross the borders in difficult conditions.

While children said that both boys and girls are at risk of being sexually assaulted or raped, and that unaccompanied boys are exposed to a particular risk of sexual abuse, other sexual abuse is gender specific. **Child marriage practices are intensified** in situations of uncertain and complex migration journey, which particularly endangers girls. Unaccompanied girls sometimes get married, often to older men, or pretend that they are travelling with their husbands, believing that this contributes to their safety. Whether it is an early marriage or human trafficking that the girls are more or less aware of, travelling in such an arrangement carries a significant risk of violence and exploitation.

"So, it's better for the girls not to come on this way, on this route..."

Mahdi, boy, 17



"If the kid is totally alone in the group, doesn't have any cousin or friends, someone, usually the smuggler, tries to use him. He tells him to do this or that, he uses him. If he has someone, then he is protected."

Ali, boy, 16



Evidence suggests that unaccompanied girls join other families on the road and try to keep a low profile, as they are at a higher risk of sexual abuse². However, even girls travelling with families are exposed to sexual violence, whether from smugglers who separate them or through attacks in reception centres. **Boys are also exposed to sexual violence, particularly if they are travelling without their family.**

Many unaccompanied refugee and migrant children, especially boys, come from families where the eldest male child is considered 'responsible' for their younger and older family members.³ There is a clear expectation that the child will, regardless of difficulties, be capable, efficient and resilient, fulfil their tasks and thus secure a better future for the whole family.

Children travelling unaccompanied must take decisions that are often beyond their emotional and social maturity, knowledge and life experience, which makes them particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of abuse.

Violence against children travelling with families

Children who travel with families are better protected than unaccompanied children, according to the accounts of both children and professionals, although they share many of the hardships of unaccompanied children. Their **parents' presence is probably the most important protective factor** for them. However, children in families gave personal accounts that smugglers and police officers had beaten their parents, brothers and sisters; they had witnessed the humiliation and separation of families; and they had to carry younger brothers and sisters who could not walk for long.

The journey also affects parental skills and competences.

Due to the difficulties and experiences that parents are exposed to, they are sometimes unable to recognise the needs of their children and may even fail to provide the basic conditions that are at their disposal.



² Save the Children (2021) Girls on the Move in the Balkans, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/girls_on_the_move_balkan.pdf

³ Ibrahim, F. A., & Heuer, J. P. R. (2013) The assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders among Muslims. In F. A. Paniagua & A.-M. Yamada (Eds.) Handbook of multicultural mental health: Assessment and treatment of diverse populations (367–387) Elsevier Academic Press.

II OTHER HARDSHIPS AND ADVERSITY ON THE ROUTE

Children said they often don't have enough food and water during their journey, and that they are often **deprived by smugglers**. They experience hunger and thirst most acutely when they travel on foot to cross borders, when they carry only the bare minimum of things. In addition, they often do not have access to adequate and safe shelter.

Several children mentioned that they saw dead bodies on the route; people who had died as a result of the effort involved with the journey or had otherwise perished.

Children said they had to travel in overloaded cars, sleep in the woods where they are at risk from wild animal attacks, and stay in squats where they are threatened with abuse. During some sections of their journeys, children cross large bodies of water in inadequate and crowded vessels, facing a real danger of drowning.

Reception centres that are inhumane and ill-suited to children

The conditions at facilities where children are accommodated or detained after they are apprehended on the borders, and other accommodation along the Balkans route, are often inhumane, degrading, and not adapted to meet the needs of children. **Children said these facilities are often cold, without beds or heating, and with limited opportunities for freedom of movement** and hygiene maintenance. These conditions became worse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During their stay in reception or detention centres, **children are interviewed, but are not given clear instructions or explanations of their rights**, including their right to legal counsel. Their status as a child is often denied, with or without the use of violent methods.

Children said that **violence in reception centres was less common than at borders**, especially in those with well-developed security procedures and a functioning security service that provides suitable protection. Children claim that they feel safe in centres if the security staff do their jobs, and that they **enjoy having access to educational and recreational activities and assistance from international organisations**.

However, children did describe negative experiences in facilities in Greece and highlighted that the now-destroyed Moria camp on the island of Lesbos was especially dangerous. In addition to a lack of services, protection and support, they described a climate of fear of sexual violence, especially against children, robberies, mass fights and even murders. Violence against children was reported even in better organised Greek reception centres with a more substantial police presence, and several respondents particularly highlighted sexual abuse of prepubescent boys.

Age assessment procedures carried out at reception centres can sometimes include invasive methods, which can cause children physical and psychological harm. In countries where age assessment procedures are undeveloped, or in some cases completely absent, children are endangered by the prejudice of decision makers and the propensity for errors in age assessments. Many unaccompanied children are wrongly identified and classified as adults, and vice versa, some young adults are classified as children and accommodated with children, significantly increasing the risk of violence.

"A child, simply, cannot go on... Mountains, up, down... After 15 days, you look at your feet, you no longer recognise yourself. That's how exhausted you are."

Abdurahman, boy, 17



"It [a reception centre] was a horrible place for everyone, children in particular."

Zehra, girl, 16



III HOW CHILDREN COPE

"There were children who harmed themselves, they would take razor blades and cut themselves. There were even cases I heard of where children threw themselves off bridges because of the despair and misery, because of the pitiful way of life."

Amin, boy, 16



The children interviewed in this research displayed a number of symptoms associated with prolonged exposure to traumatic events, or identified these symptoms in their siblings (especially younger children) and peers. Strong and harmful stimuli, physical and psychological vulnerability due to physical and sexual violence, high levels of stress, and prolonged fear can overwhelm the capacities of children of all ages and impact their ability to influence their emotions. Extreme intimidating events, especially if repeated, affect the developing brain by creating distortions in the brain's neurological development so that survival mechanisms become more dominant than learning mechanisms.⁴

Such powerful and adverse experiences during early and middle childhood and adolescence are usually **associated with long-term mental and physical health difficulties** and impaired cognitive, emotional and social functioning.⁵

In younger children, reactions to violence usually include excessive fear, difficulty falling and staying asleep, somatisation of tension and hypersensitivity through rapid heartbeat, fainting, and so on. Older children reported that they had repeated unwanted memories of traumatic experiences (flashbacks) and experienced feelings of helplessness, lack of prospects, resignation, loss of previously adopted values, beliefs and views of the world and interpersonal relationships, as well as one's own position, role and value.

Children have developed a set of coping strategies. The most frequent adaptive strategies that were identified in this research include seeking social support, trusting one's own abilities, threat analysis, distancing oneself to get a better view of the problem, planning to overcome difficulties, making sense of events, and focusing on goals.

In addition to these adaptive strategies, children show negative coping strategies. A striking number of professionals in the focus groups and children, especially those who were travelling unaccompanied, gave examples of **self-harm, suicide attempts, and abuse of psychoactive substances** as passive strategies for coping with stress and difficulty.

Some children sought protection by becoming involved in criminal and sexual activities with smugglers and other adults.



⁴ Atkinson, J. (2013). Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource 21). Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

⁵ Cook, A., Spinazzola, J., Ford, J. D., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., & Cloitre, M. (2005). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Annals*, 35(5), 390-398.

Normalisation of violence and other adaptation strategies

Both children's interviews and the narratives provided by professionals indicate that **children see violence as an integral and an almost inevitable part of their experience and so they normalise it.** There are multiple reasons for this, including:

- **Ignoring abuse is a survival mechanism**, which allows children to maintain their basic psychological resilience in extremely difficult conditions.
- There is often **a lack of protection and support available** to these children, so they deny that they need support in the first place.
- **Children believe that they need to appear strong and capable**, as they think that they would be at more risk of violence if they were seen as weak or feeble.

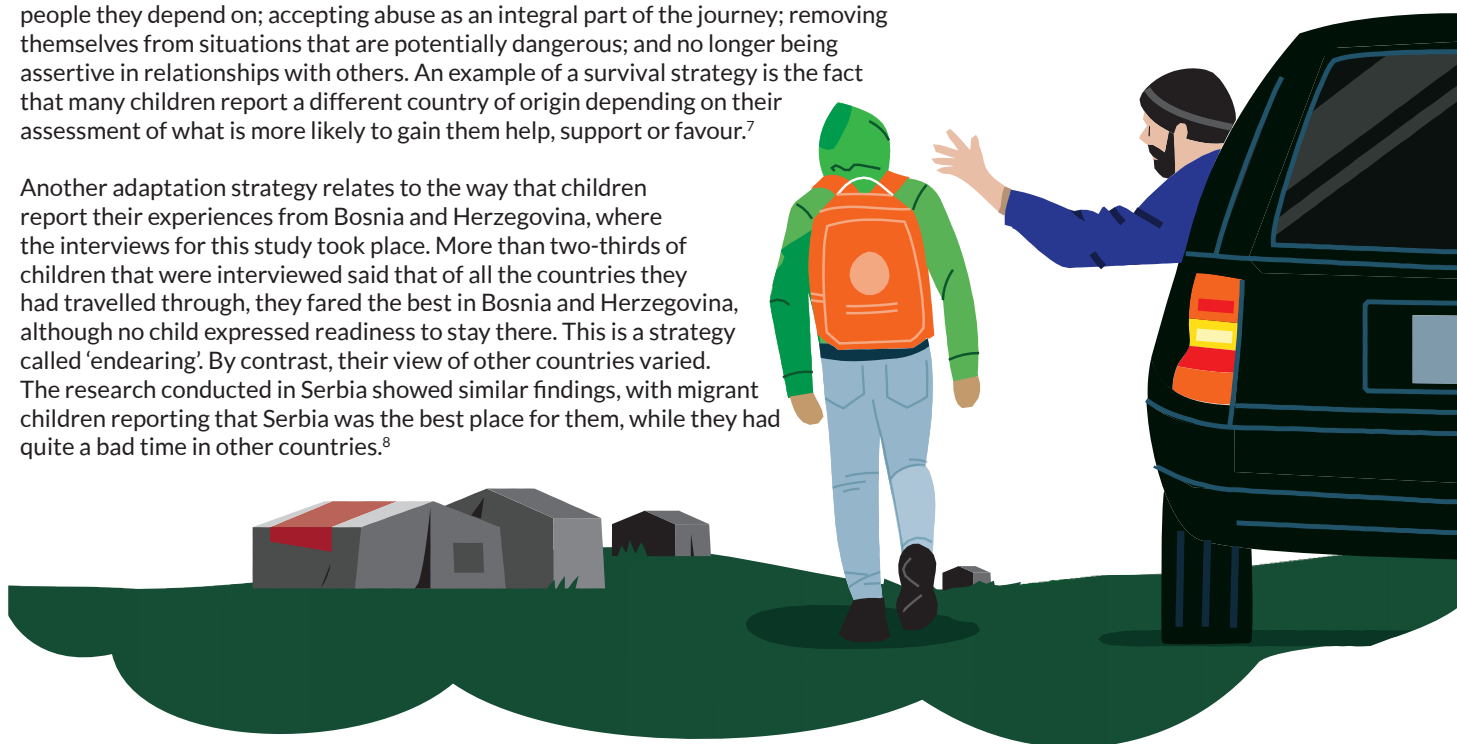
In many interviews, children tried to normalise violence through laughter; this is an attempt to regulate strong, upsetting emotions as well as a gesture of 'disassociation' from the traumatic experience and the pain it causes.⁶ In this context, laughter differs from humour, which was noted in only a very small number of interviews as an adaptive coping strategy.

Crying was far less common than laughter, with only eight out of 48 children crying as they recalled the violence and hardships they had endured on their journey.

Children found it easier to recognise and talk about violent experiences that they were geographically, socially and emotionally distanced from. They found it easier to talk about other children's experiences with violence, and abuses committed by people who they perceived as 'others' or 'foreign,' including members of other ethnic and religious groups and police officers.

On their journey, **children are forced to adapt to survive.** This means developing self-protection mechanisms such as increased submissiveness to the more powerful people they depend on; accepting abuse as an integral part of the journey; removing themselves from situations that are potentially dangerous; and no longer being assertive in relationships with others. An example of a survival strategy is the fact that many children report a different country of origin depending on their assessment of what is more likely to gain them help, support or favour.⁷

Another adaptation strategy relates to the way that children report their experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the interviews for this study took place. More than two-thirds of children that were interviewed said that of all the countries they had travelled through, they fared the best in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although no child expressed readiness to stay there. This is a strategy called 'endearing'. By contrast, their view of other countries varied. The research conducted in Serbia showed similar findings, with migrant children reporting that Serbia was the best place for them, while they had quite a bad time in other countries.⁸



⁶ Gross, J. J. (2013) 'Emotion regulation: Taking stock and moving forward' *Emotion* 13: 359– 365.

⁷ For example, sometimes children from Afghanistan say they are from Pakistan (or vice versa), sometimes that they are from Iran, depending on the country they are in.

⁸ Žegarac, N., Isakov, B. A., Perišić, N., Marković, V. (2022) Response system for the migrant children in Serbia: challenges for the rights-based approach, in *Children in migration: perspectives from South East Europe*.

IV HELP AND SELF HELP

"No one, no one helps us. No one. Until you call someone, some organisation, they will come and help you, otherwise, you are on the road, people will pass by, and they won't help."

Mehdia, girl, 13



A striking proportion of the children that were interviewed (about 1 in 3) have **developed a belief that no one and nothing can (or wants to) help them on their journey, and some even believe they are no longer able to help themselves.** Many are comforted by their faith in God and universal justice, with this deterministic approach allowing them to make sense of their suffering and supporting their belief that things will work out in the end.

Adults in their immediate environment who have the power to help, such as smugglers and police officers, are often those who commit acts of violence against the children. This causes them to lose trust that responsible adults can or want to help them. Unaccompanied children rely primarily on themselves, other children, and spiritual support far more than on adults.

There are limited prospects for accountability or redress for the violence that most of these children have experienced, so one might conclude that these children's mistrust is justified. In cases of violence identified in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a requirement for careful documentation and submission of a report to competent authorities, centres for social work, and police, in order to initiate criminal or other proceedings. In Serbia, there are standard operating procedures in place that institutions must follow to protect migrating children but in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are no consistent procedures. Different centres have rules of their own. The staff in the reception centres monitor children's behaviour. If indicators of violence are identified, children are interviewed and referred to available support services, which are, often, insufficient.

According to the professionals interviewed for this study, the social protection system is not sufficiently flexible when it comes to violence against children. The slow pace of the justice system and the mobility of children mean that reported cases are rarely followed through. Even when there is evidence and hard proof that children have experienced violence, children rarely stay long in one place, which makes provision of adequate assistance and support difficult. According to several of the interviewed children, this further discourages them from reporting violence.

Children also consider inconsistent rules, and frequent changes to rules concerning their status, without even consulting them or the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are in direct contact with them, as a particularly great injustice. When government stakeholders make the rules unilaterally, children further lose trust not only in state stakeholders but in these NGOs as well.

Children's views of services and protection

The interviewed children **mainly see official institutions,** such as healthcare institutions, schools, public child protection services, and centres for social work, as **insufficiently interested, disinterested, or as a potential threat** (due to police violence or administrative services issuing official documents). Children often trust official institutions – and those whose role it is to help or protect them – far less than people that they know, partly because these institutions and their staff are present in children's lives only sporadically, and have only limited mechanisms to protect them from violence.

In organised accommodation, where children have access to doctors, their experience of the healthcare system varies considerably. The approach that doctors take with them ranges from humiliation and insults, through indifference, to dedication and a desire to help. **Access to mental health care is a particular problem.** In Serbia, it is very difficult to secure appropriate medical support for refugee and migrant children facing mental health issues, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is almost impossible.

As children perceive official institutions as disinterested, they rely on international and local humanitarian organisations. Their experiences with these organisations vary. Some children feel that they receive valuable and useful information, material support (such as food, medicines and clothes), and psychological support, especially in the form of psycho-educational, cultural, sports and recreational activities.

Children feel closer to field workers from civil society organisations and others who assist them if they meet them regularly.

When these individuals have gained the children's trust, the children rely on them for information and advice.

However, children also say that **assistance is not available to them in certain highly demanding situations – for example, when crossing borders or immediately after** – or that the help that is available is unsuitable or insufficient. Their requirements for assistance and support are sometimes not recognised or seriously considered, which undermines their already fragile trust and belief in the good intentions of the people helping them.

Professional aid workers and others who assist children understand that they will only occasionally manage to form a relationship of trust with children; that children on the Balkans route do not have sufficient information available to them; and that more needs to be done to improve the identification and reporting of violence. Importantly, **for a child to report violence, they need to be given a lot of information and assured that someone can help them**, a process in which trust plays a key role.

Some unaccompanied children who had established good relationships with their **guardians in reception centres** were prepared to share their problems with them, underlining the importance of this role. Cultural mediators can also be positive role models and play an important role in recognising and addressing violence.

Informal forms of help and self-help

Alongside help from their immediate family, **peer help is of extreme importance for children** as it fosters the feeling of belonging to a group, a belief that they will not be left behind on the road, and a certain emotional stability. Children expect solidarity and reciprocal assistance when they are in a group with people with whom they have family ties, or peer ties. When such help is not there, because it has been lost (due to separation from their family or group of close compatriots), or when it fails (when others refuse to share scarce resources for survival, refuse help or abuse trust), children feel there is a failure of humanity, solidarity and integrity.

Children also mentioned the local population of countries they pass through as reliable sources of practical and emotional support. **Help along the way, and gestures of respect and acceptance, make it easier for children to deal with hardships.** Support from local communities is particularly important to children when they are pushed back from borders and travel back to reception centres. In these situations, local people have sometimes taken them into their home to rest, given them food, drink and clothing, or provided them with transportation to the reception centre.



V CHILDREN'S HOPES, RESILIENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"My request to the Croatian police is to open the borders and let us go across. And, please, don't punish us."

Mehdia, girl, 13



"I'd love it if they listened to us a little better."

Hassan, boy, 15



"I have only one plea, that these problems be solved. Even little children and adults, we are all tired, we are tired from breathing."

Harun, boy, 17



The children interviewed for this study started their journey to Western Europe from countries that were faced with economic and political instability and conflict. Many went to extraordinary lengths to overcome difficulties and survive the journey, and displayed tremendous resourcefulness and resolve. Children often stated their hopes for a better life in Western Europe, like Sultana, age 16, who said, "I have heard from my friends that in Germany they care more, they really care about children. Over there, children can go to schools, they can continue their education, they are free." The goals they set for themselves, or that their families have set for them, inspired and empowered them to persevere in spite of the many expected and unexpected adversities that arose during their journey.

One in four children interviewed said it was important to them that their viewpoints and perspectives be taken into consideration and all interviewed children showed their need to be heard. Their recommendations range from improvements to reception centres, to what civil society organisations can do to help prevent violence at the border. For example, Mansoor, age 17, said it was important to have freedom of movement in reception centres and "not make it like a jail, but something with good services and protection, so that children can leave the centre and later come back, especially on weekends." When discussing what they need, children emphasised sincerely expressed care, education, psychological support, physical activities and entertainment.

As for politicians, children want them to contribute to peace, so that children would not have to leave their home. Concrete suggestions include **preventing child deportation and 'deterrence' from crossing the border**, as these practices are humiliating, multiply threats, and create new risks for children.



VI CONCLUSION AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Every child involved in this research has survived violent events and circumstances on the Balkans route that were experienced as physical or emotional threats to their survival.

Other studies have also found similar forms of violence against children on the Balkans route.⁹

Local and international humanitarian organisations, child protection services and others that seek to assist these children can play a critical role in helping them recover from the traumatic events they have been subjected to. They must invest time and effort to build children's trust and truly listen to what these children need.

Ultimately, however, the deterrence and containment policies prioritised by the European Union and countries along the Balkans route are at the root of the violence that migrant and refugee children systematically face on their journey through the Balkans. These policies have resulted in direct violence perpetrated by state agents such as police or border guards, and to indirect violence perpetrated by others – because with safe and legal routes closed off, refugees and migrants must rely on networks of people smugglers who exploit and abuse them.

Inadequate and often inhumane reception conditions in prison-like or underserved camps exacerbate the suffering of these children, and the lack of adequate mental health and psychosocial support along the Balkans route increases the risk of lasting and irreparable harm.



⁹ See for example, Amnesty International (2019) Pushed to the edge: Violence and abuse against refugees and migrants along the Balkans Route London: Amnesty International; Jovanović, K. (2020) Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route Beograd: Save the Children International, Save the Children North West Balkans; Bjekić, J., Vukčević Marković, M., Todorović, N., Vračević, M. (2020) Mental health of refugees and migrants Beograd: Red Cross of Serbia.

The European Union and national governments should:

- **Reverse policies and halt practices that are hostile to refugees**, including unlawful pushbacks, reliance on third countries to outsource refugee hosting and restrictions on access to asylum.
- **Provide refugee and migrant children with access to safe, regular and legal migration pathways** so that they do not need to depend on smugglers or be forced to engage in labour, including the worst forms of child labour.
- **Ensure all policies and operations related to securing the borders comply with human rights law and the principle of non-refoulement.** Children and their families must have access to asylum and procedures based on their individual protection needs and best interest.
- **Establish an effective and truly independent border monitoring mechanism, with sufficient resources to ensure effective child protection.** To achieve this, governments should initiate a transparent consultation and participation process involving all relevant stakeholders, including children and international and local NGOs.
- **Ensure that civil society organisations that support refugee and migrant children have access to border crossing areas** so that they can provide protection and assistance to children in need, including those who experience pushbacks.
- **Invest in and promote capacity building for border police and all other actors interacting with refugee and migrant children** at borders and inside the country. Training should be provided by relevant stakeholders, including civil society organisations, with expertise in human rights and child protection, among others. The training should address effective implementation of relevant human and child rights legislation, child protection and protection from gender-based violence, as well as child safeguarding.
- **Ensure that child refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence and torture or other ill-treatment committed by the border police have access to justice:**
 - Governments must ensure that there are clear, safe, confidential, effective and child-appropriate mechanisms for reporting unlawful returns, violence, assets seizing and other criminal acts undertaken by the border officials.
 - There must be strong, effective accountability mechanisms for police officers who violate children's rights, to ensure investigative actions are taken to determine responsibility in case of allegations of unlawful forced returns, excessive use of force, seizing assets and other abuses.
- **Invest in early identification and assistance of children at risk of violence, abuse or exploitation.** Instances in which adults target vulnerable children for exploitation must be identified and mitigated and there must be effective prosecution of the adult/s who are responsible for recruiting and exploiting children.
- **Ensure that child refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence have access to inclusive and gender responsive support and services** to foster their prospects for recovery and reintegration.
- **Ensure that children have access to safe and dignified accommodation wherever they are.** Unaccompanied and separated children should not be placed in shared accommodation with adults. Detention of children and restriction of movement is never in the best interest of children and should be avoided at all costs.
- **Promptly appoint a guardian for any unaccompanied and separated children.** This should be an interested and caring adult who is able to protect their rights and best interests, with full participation from the child at each stage of their journey. The legislative framework should provide for independent performance of guardianship functions, and countries should consider the options for setting up a mechanism for special and separate government guardianship for children in specific situations of migration, exile, trafficking in human beings, and other cases that require complex intergovernmental cooperation in safeguarding the rights of the child.¹⁰
- **Invest in building trust of refugee and migrant children** who receive services in accommodation centres and other settings. To achieve this, children and non-governmental stakeholders should be consulted and involved in decision-making. Introduce regular monitoring mechanisms to be able to improve institutional, systemic responses to children's protection and other needs.
- **Regularly review and evaluate mechanisms for full participation of children** in decision making processes of interest for them, so that adequate participation models suited for them can be developed and improved.
- **Involve local communities in ensuring adequate reception of refugee and migrant children** and their integration, preventing stigmatisation and discrimination, and promoting human rights and solidarity with children and families in vulnerable situations.
- **Only perform age assessments according to established procedures**, employing a multi-disciplinary approach which takes into account physical, developmental, psychological, environmental and cultural factors, thereby allowing for the most reliable result. Individuals undergoing age assessments should be treated as children and the benefit of the doubt should be applied to the outcomes.
- **Develop and strengthen child protection services**, ensuring they are well-resourced, inclusive and that the workforce is trained and supported to work with refu-

¹⁰ In Serbia, guardianship as a legal provision is connected to territorial jurisdiction and the local level, and does not provide for independent performance of guardianship functions, since the body performing guardianship duties (social work centre) also makes decisions regarding the children and provides services; Milutinović, N. (2018) Guardianship institute for unaccompanied children or children separated from parents/guardians: Situational analysis and recommendations for improvement Belgrade: Save the Children International.

gee and migrant children. Governments should adopt a strategic approach to increase the number, reach and skill of trained child protection workers, using tools, resources and initiatives to ensure quality support and accountability. This includes supporting efforts by professional associations to enhance professional growth and development. It also includes addressing barriers to access for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and ensuring that all aspects of child protection and migration and refugee systems – including laws, policies, law enforcement agencies and child protection services – take into account the violence experienced by refugee and migrant children.

- **Ensure prompt access to safe education** as an important protective factor for children. Governments must also ensure education and child protection sectors are proactively work together to ensure all children have an opportunity to learn at all stages of their journey. This also includes providing:
 - access to informal education and local language classes to prepare for successful school integration;
 - certificates or micro-credentials within formal education systems, which will serve as a basis for continuing education in another country;
 - more opportunities for schooling of children in middle and late adolescence, particularly girls;
 - certified courses and opportunities to gain practical experiences and professional development.
- **Provide access to high-quality health care, including psychosocial support and mental health care for children** and their families to prevent and address mental health challenges caused or worsened by the adversities of the journey.
- **Improve information exchange with children** by ensuring that children have access to child-friendly information, particularly on risks, reporting mechanisms and available support, at every stage of their journey and at all places where they can be reached.

Stakeholders who provide support and implement protection programmes for refugee and migrant children should:

- **Ensure that promoting and training professionals and implementing professional knowledge about trauma** in working with refugee and migrant children is the basis for providing adequate psychosocial support. Trauma-informed approaches highlight the importance of promoting physical and psychological security and stability, building trust-based relationships with children and families, ensuring peer support and cooperation, nurturing children's agency, creating space for children to unwind and be children, and promoting intersectionality in organising provision of assistance.^{11;12}

¹¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) SAMHSA's Concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach, SAMHSA Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative.

¹² ISSOP Migration Working Group 'ISSOP position statement on migrant child health' Child Care Health Development (2018) 44(1):161-170.

- **Introduce mechanisms for regular consultations with children** regarding the organisation of their daily lives in reception centres, ways in which they see their needs, and the possibility to seek help and support, including protection from violence. One such model could be supporting children's associations (e.g., boys' and girls' parliaments) and ensuring that children develop skills to advocate for themselves.¹³
- **Give children the opportunity to advocate for themselves and their needs within peer groups**, both among refugee and migrant children where they may feel freer to vocalise their opinions and with children from local communities, which will provide them with opportunities for an exchange of experiences, better learning and intercultural exchange, and create conditions conducive to the possibility of integration.
- **Improve notification and information exchange with children on their rights**, available services and accommodation, and protection and reporting mechanisms in case of violence. Information should be child-friendly and accessible in various appropriate locations during the journey, including border crossing points, healthcare institutions and reception centres.
- **Respect and acknowledge the cultural context of children through well-conceived consultations** including children, their parents and guardians. This approach requires the implementation of ongoing training on culturally sensitive work with refugees and migrants and prohibition of discrimination, as well as on the rights of the child and child-centred activities. Recording and supporting the implementation of best practices is an integral part of this approach.
- **Review and improve existing procedures, and elaborate new ones, for taking specific action in cases of reporting violence or harassment** by adults who are accountable for children in reception centres and other forms of accommodation
- **Invest the time that is necessary to build trust with children** so that they can speak about difficult experiences. A strengths-based approach, cultural sensitivity and a genuine readiness to hear and acknowledge the children's voice must accompany this process.
- **Affirm healthy responses as a response to stress**, primarily through encouraging habits such as healthy eating, regular physical activity, playing and engaging children in activities in the community.
- **Provide ongoing supervision for everyone who is in direct contact with children who are suffering violence**, and especially field workers, interpreters and cultural mediators, with an accompanying structured process.
- **Dedicate more resources and importance to the roles of cultural mediators and interpreters**, who

¹³ Children Parliamentary Sessions lead to improved lives of unaccompanied refugee and migrant children in Bosnia and Herzegovina; see here: https://nwb.savethechildren.net/sites/nwb.savethechildren.net/files/library/2021_Case%20study_NWB_Boys%20Parliament.pdf

are the forefront of interventions for refugee and migrant children, to ensure that children have access to well-trained staff and that these professionals have access to continual professional development and capacity building.

- **Support parents in situations of migration to provide conditions for children's wellbeing and their protection from violence**, and to facilitate and support communication and exchange between family members. Programmes should provide psychosocial support to parents to support them in facing challenges of parenting on the move; ensure that parents recognise violence and build skills for parenting without violence; and are informed about mechanisms for reporting violence and seeking support.
- **Develop and implement programmes that promote peer support**, peer education on violence and creating peer support networks.

Recommendations for future research include:

- As migrations are a dynamic, complex phenomenon connecting a series of countries, **research should be developed in such a way as to connect the countries of origin, transit and destination**. This can provide better insights into the possibilities of joint interventions to protect children throughout their journey.
- **Longitudinal studies should be implemented to monitor the long-term consequences of perilous journeys** on the mental health and wellbeing of refugee and migrant children. Examining the consequences of traumatic experiences and the level of psychosocial adaptation and post-traumatic growth would provide a foundation for the development of systemic interventions in the fields of protection from violence and preserving mental health of refugee and migrant children.
- **Research should be carried out on the impact of the migration journey on children growing up**, including the impact on the process of individuation and sexual development of adolescents in migration, in order to create adequate programmes.
- Research on violence against refugee and migrant children should also incorporate **debriefing sessions and vicarious trauma prevention strategies to avoid the burnout of researchers and cultural mediators** and to conserve the reliability of research findings.
- **Listen to and have dialogue with children with various background**, to ensure the variety of experience of migration and displacement is taken into account when response plans are designed.

IMPRESSUM

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The Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub (BMDH) was established to ensure visibility and support for children on the move in the Balkans. Drawing on experience gained in responding to the refugee and migrant crisis, BMDH monitors trends in migrations across the Balkans and conducts research on particular issues related to children in mixed migrations. The hub issues regular reports, documents good practices, improves learning and knowledge sharing, and promotes emergency preparedness. By developing partnerships and liaising with other stakeholders that work with children on the move, BMDH provides and promotes robust advocacy for children, ensuring that their needs are put at the forefront.

*Find the full report "Wherever we go, someone does us harm: Violence against refugee and migrant children arriving in Europe through the Balkans" and our other reports at:
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net>*

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