



TRENDS IN UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED  
CHILDREN SEEKING ASYLUM IN EUROPE,  
2000

NOVEMBER 2001

DIVISION OF OPERATIONAL SUPPORT  
UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES  
GENEVA

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## INTRODUCTION

1. “Unaccompanied children” (also called “unaccompanied minors”) are children under 18 years of age who have been separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so<sup>1</sup>. However, recent experience has highlighted that, even in emergency situations, not all children are found to be unaccompanied as defined above, even though many have been separated from their previous legal or customary caregiver. Such children, although living with extended family members, may face risks similar to those encountered by unaccompanied refugee children. Consequently, the term “separated child” is now widely used to draw attention to the potential protection needs of this group. “Separated children” are thus defined as children under 18 years of age who are separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver<sup>2</sup>. Considering that in the European context both terms are used, the abbreviation “UAMs/SC” is applied throughout this note.

2. UAMs/SC may be seeking asylum because of fear of persecution or the lack of protection due to human rights violations, armed conflict or disturbances in their own country. The fact that these children and adolescents are separated from their parents or their legal or customary caregiver increases the risks of them being exposed to exploitation, including trafficking, or abuse. Due to their special protection needs, including access to tracing and family reunion, the identification of UAMs/SC among those seeking asylum is vitally important<sup>3</sup>.

3. This note presents the available statistics on UAMs/SC seeking asylum in Europe. The data were reported by Governments and compiled by UNHCR. Generally, the extent of the problem of UAMs/SC seeking asylum in Europe is difficult to establish due to a lack of accurate data. Basic figures on UAMs/SC seeking asylum are not available for a number of countries, either because the asylum statistics do not make the necessary distinction or because data on foreign UAMs/SC arriving or residing in the country do not indicate whether the child has applied for asylum. Some countries provided data in the form of estimates without the necessary details, such as country of origin, age or sex.

4. Comparing national data on UAMs/SC seeking asylum poses a serious challenge due to the differences in definitions and recording practices. For instance, in Germany the age limit for UAMs/SC was found to be 16, compared to 18 years as laid down in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In Greece, data were only available for unaccompanied persons aged 0 to 24<sup>4</sup>. In Belgium, information is available for different categories of UAMs/SC. While this note presents the data for minor asylum-seekers who

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<sup>1</sup> *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care*, UNHCR Geneva, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Secretary-General to the United Nations General Assembly on *Protection and assistance to unaccompanied and separated refugee children*, 7 September 2001 (A/56/333).

<sup>3</sup> *Separated Children in Europe Programme: “Statement of Good Practice”*, Save the Children and UNHCR, October 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Due to this significantly different age group, the available data for unaccompanied persons applying for asylum in Greece (870 in 1999 and 1,820 in 2000) are not included in Table 1.

arrived alone in Belgium (848 in 2000), the figure almost doubles (1,590) when, in line with the international definition provided in paragraph 1, minors who are accompanied by relatives are also included.

5. National practices also differ when it comes to the updating of information captured upon arrival. For instance, if the age of the UAM/SC proves to be inaccurate or if the child joins a close relative staying in the asylum country, some countries adjust their statistics whereas other countries retain the original information. The data presented here should thus be considered as very indicative only, particularly when comparing the experience of different countries.

#### **TOTAL NUMBER OF ASYLUM APPLICATIONS**

6. During 2000, some 16,100 UAMs/SC applied for asylum in the 26 European countries listed in Table 1. The Netherlands received the largest number of asylum claims lodged by UAMs/SC (6,705), followed by the United Kingdom (2,733) and Hungary (1,170).

7. UAMs/SC seeking asylum constituted 4% of the total number of asylum-seekers lodging a claim in 2000. However, the proportion of UAMs/SC in the total number of applications lodged differs significantly between asylum countries. In Hungary and the Netherlands, UAMs/SC accounted for 15% of all applications lodged during 2000, in Slovakia this proportion was 9%, whereas in all other countries UAMs/SC constituted 5% or less of the total number of asylum-seekers. As a result of these varying proportions, Germany, which received 18% of all asylum claims lodged in Europe during 2000, received only 6% of all claims submitted by UAMs/SC, whereas Hungary, which received 2% of all asylum applications, received 7% of all UAMs/SC claims (Table 1).

8. In the 17 countries for which data were available for 1999 and for 2000, both the annual number of UAMs/SC (15,000-16,000) as well as the percentage of UAMs/SC in the total number of asylum claimants (4%) has remained stable.

#### **ORIGIN OF ASYLUM-SEEKERS**

9. A number of observations can be made regarding the origin of UAMs/SC seeking asylum in Europe. First, there are large variations in the origin of UAMs/SC applying for asylum in the countries listed in Table 2. A second observation is that the main countries of origin of UAMs/SC are quite different from the main countries of origin of asylum-seekers in general. For instance, whereas Rwandan asylum-seekers lodged 13% of all UAMs/SC claims submitted in Belgium, they accounted for only 2% of the total number asylum applications.

10. A third conclusion is that the proportion of UAMs/SC in the total number of applications differs not only between the nationalities in the same asylum country, but also for the same nationality between asylum countries. Thus,

share of UAMs/SC in the number of Chinese applications submitted in the Netherlands in 2000 (67%) contrasts significantly with the proportion of UAMs/SC in the total number of asylum applications submitted (15%). Moreover, it differs remarkably from the proportion of UAMs/SC in Chinese asylum applications submitted in the UK (3%).

### AGE AND SEX OF ASYLUM APPLICANTS

11. A limited number of countries provided information on the age and sex of UAMs/SC seeking asylum. As regards age, the analysis is further hindered by the differences in reporting formats (by year of birth, by age or in various age groups). Moreover, the quality of the age statistics is affected by difficulties in age assessment of minors.

12. The available data suggest that UAMs/SC are predominantly 16 and 17 years old. For the six countries with comparable information, this age group accounted for some 50% of all UAMs/SC seeking asylum. In three of the six countries, all UAMs/SC seeking asylum were in this age group (see box).

Country of asylum	0-15		16-17		Total
	Total	%	Total	%	
Luxembourg	-	0%	10	100%	10
Netherlands	3,280	49%	3,425	51%	6,705
Romania	*	12%	30	88%	34
Slovenia	-	0%	45	100%	45
Spain	-	0%	*	100%	*
Switzerland	293	40%	434	60%	727
Total	3,577	48%	3,948	52%	7,525

13. UAMs/SC seeking asylum are predominantly male. Of the 8,760 UAMs/SC for which information was available, only 27% were female. In three of the seven countries for which information was available, the percentage female UAMs/SC asylum-seekers was 5% or less (see box).

Country of asylum	Female		Male		Total
	Total	%	Total	%	
Bulgaria	*	5%	42	95%	44
Germany	243	26%	703	74%	946
Ireland	99	33%	201	67%	300
Netherlands	1,877	28%	4,828	72%	6,705
Romania	-	0%	34	100%	34
Spain	-	0%	*	100%	*
Switzerland	127	17%	600	83%	727
Total	2,348	27%	6,412	73%	8,760

### CONCLUSIONS

14. The information presented here suggests that trends in UAMs/SC seeking asylum in Europe are quite distinct from the general asylum patterns.

Moreover, it appears that the basic characteristics (origin, sex and age) of UAMs/SC seeking asylum differ significantly from country to country.

15. This short review has revealed significant differences in national definitions for unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum, jeopardizing a basic analysis of the problem at the international level. To assess the exact scope and nature of UAMs/SC seeking asylum in Europe, there is a need to harmonize national definitions.

16. Important gaps exist in the availability of basic data. In order to monitor and address the special needs of these UAMs/SC seeking asylum, minimum information is required on the total number of applications as well as on key characteristics (origin, age, sex, etc.). Moreover, it is important to identify UAMs/SC not only in the asylum application process, but also when the claims are being determined.

<b>Table 1</b>									
<b>Asylum applications lodged in Europe, 1998-2000:</b>									
<b>Total number of applicants and applications lodged by UAM/SCs</b>									
Country of asylum	1998			1999			2000		
	Total	UAM/SC	%	Total	UAM/SC	%	Total	UAM/SC	%
Austria	13,810	-	..	20,100	-	..	18,280	553	3%
Belgium	21,970	1,488	7%	35,780	1,706	5%	42,690	848	2%
Bulgaria	830	-	..	1,330	12	1%	1,760	44	3%
Croatia	26	-	..	46	-	..	24	-	..
Czech Republic	4,080	114	3%	7,290	336	5%	8,790	298	3%
Denmark	5,700	96	2%	6,470	102	2%	10,350	197	2%
Estonia	23	-	..	21	-	..	3	-	..
Finland	1,270	137	11%	3,110	-	..	3,170	94	3%
France	22,380	-	..	30,910	163	1%	39,780	215	1%
Germany	98,640	-	..	95,110	1,117	1%	78,560	946	1%
Hungary	7,370	209	3%	11,500	620	5%	7,800	1,170	15%
Ireland	4,630	-	..	7,720	34	0%	11,100	300	3%
Italy	11,120	-	..	33,360	-	..	14,000	40	0%
Lithuania	160	4	3%	130	4	3%	200	9	5%
Luxembourg	1,710	-	..	2,910	-	..	630	10	2%
Netherlands	45,220	3,504	8%	39,300	5,009	13%	43,900	6,705	15%
Norway	8,370	379	5%	10,160	561	6%	10,840	566	5%
Poland	3,370	297	9%	2,960	101	3%	4,590	69	2%
Portugal	340	19	6%	270	18	7%	200	10	5%
Romania	1,240	-	..	1,670	-	..	1,370	34	2%
Slovakia	510	-	..	1,310	-	..	1,560	145	9%
Slovenia	500	-	..	870	-	..	9,240	45	0%
Spain	6,650	34	1%	8,410	47	1%	7,930	4	0%
Sweden	12,840	295	2%	11,230	236	2%	16,300	350	2%
Switzerland	41,300	2,489	6%	46,070	1,775	4%	17,610	727	4%
United Kingdom	46,020	3,037	7%	71,150	3,349	5%	80,320	2,733	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>360,079</b>	<b>12,102</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>449,187</b>	<b>15,190</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>430,997</b>	<b>16,112</b>	<b>4%</b>

**Notes**

The data generally refer to the number of new applications submitted or applications submitted in first instance.  
 A dash indicates that the value is zero or that the information is not available.  
 Austria: the number of UAM/SC concerns those who are registered in Vienna only.  
 Finland, Italy and Slovenia: estimated figures.  
 Germany: UAM/SC are persons below the age of 16 without at least one parent.  
 The source of the information is generally the Government.

<b>Table 2.</b>											
<b>Asylum applications lodged in Europe, 2000:</b>											
<b>main nationalities of asylum applicants and UAM/SCs seeking asylum</b>											
The Netherlands						United Kingdom					
Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total	Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total
	Total	%	Total	%			Total	%	Total	%	
Angola	2,193	5	1,059	16	48%	Yugoslavia, FR	6,070	8	666	24	11%
China	1,406	3	942	14	67%	Afghanistan	5,555	7	300	11	5%
Guinea	1,394	3	819	12	59%	Somalia	5,020	6	177	6	4%
Sierra Leone	2,023	5	757	11	37%	Sri Lanka	1,330	2	170	6	13%
Somalia	2,110	5	410	6	19%	Turkey	3,990	5	153	6	4%
Afghanistan	5,055	12	303	5	6%	China	4,000	5	117	4	3%
Iraq	2,773	6	261	4	9%	Iraq	7,475	9	112	4	1%
Sudan	1,426	3	218	3	15%	Angola	800	1	102	4	13%
Togo	375	1	166	2	44%	Albania	1,490	2	94	3	6%
D.R. Congo	539	1	123	2	23%	Eritrea	..	..	85	3	..
Other	24,601	56	1,647	25	7%	Other	44,585	56	757	28	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>43,895</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>6,705</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>80,315</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2,733</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3%</b>
Germany											
Germany						Belgium					
Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total	Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total
	Total	%	Total	%			Total	%	Total	%	
Afghanistan	5,380	7	184	19	3%	Rwanda	866	2	108	13	12%
Turkey	8,968	11	68	7	1%	Yugoslavia, FR	4,921	12	105	12	2%
Sierra Leone	1,000	1	62	7	6%	Albania	2,674	6	101	12	4%
Vietnam	2,332	3	47	5	2%	D.R. Congo	1,421	3	79	9	6%
Iraq	11,601	15	44	5	0%	Afghanistan	861	2	31	4	4%
Ethiopia	366	0	39	4	11%	Russian Fed.	3,604	8	31	4	1%
Syria	2,641	3	35	4	1%	Burundi	305	1	25	3	8%
Yugoslavia, FR	11,121	14	34	4	0%	Turkey	838	2	21	2	3%
Sri Lanka	1,170	1	32	3	3%	Romania	948	2	20	2	2%
Iran	4,878	6	28	3	1%	Sierra Leone	611	1	20	2	3%
Other	29,107	37	373	39	1%	Other	25,642	60	307	36	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>78,564</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>946</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>42,691</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>848</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2%</b>
Norway											
Norway						Switzerland					
Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total	Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total
	Total	%	Total	%			Total	%	Total	%	
Somalia	910	8	114	20	13%	Sierra Leone	395	2	96	13	24%
Yugoslavia, FR	4,188	39	93	16	2%	Guinea	455	3	77	11	17%
Iraq	766	7	80	14	10%	Albania	339	2	68	9	20%
Afghanistan	326	3	36	6	11%	Somalia	470	3	61	8	13%
Sri Lanka	165	2	58	10	35%	Yugoslavia, FR	3,613	21	45	6	1%
Ethiopia	96	1	22	4	23%	Ethiopia	269	2	32	4	12%
Russian Fed.	471	4	20	4	4%	Sri Lanka	898	5	27	4	3%
Sierra Leone	33	0	18	3	55%	Iraq	908	5	26	4	3%
Slovak Rep.	507	5	16	3	3%	Angola	378	2	23	3	6%
Romania	712	7	13	2	2%	Turkey	1,431	8	22	3	2%
Other	2,668	25	96	17	4%	Other	8,559	49	250	34	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,842</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>566</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>17,611</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Notes</b>											
Source: Governments, compiled by UNHCR.											

**Table 2. (continued)**

Ireland						Slovak Republic					
Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total	Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total
	Total	%	Total	%			Total	%	Total	%	
Nigeria	3,404	31	155	52	5%	Afghanistan	624	40	57	39	9%
Romania	2,384	21	28	9	1%	India	380	24	32	22	8%
Sierra Leone	206	2	20	7	10%	Bangladesh	46	3	16	11	35%
Yugoslavia, FR	55	0	13	4	24%	Pakistan	161	10	15	10	9%
Ghana	106	1	11	4	10%	Iraq	115	7	11	8	10%
Côte d'Ivoire	87	1	9	3	10%	Nepal	14	1	6	4	43%
Albania	98	1	7	2	7%	Sri Lanka	87	6	*	2	3%
Angola	191	2	7	2	4%	Turkey	12	1	*	1	17%
D.R. Congo	358	3	5	2	1%	Syria	1	0	*	1	100%
Cameroon	76	1	*	1	5%	Somalia	3	0	*	1	33%
Other	4,131	37	41	14	1%	Other	113	7	*	1	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,096</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>1,556</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9%</b>

  

Finland						Poland					
Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total	Nationality	Total		UAM/SC		UAM/SC in Total
	Total	%	Total	%			Total	%	Total	%	
Poland	1,210	38	46	49	4%	Russian Fed.	1,153	25	22	32	2%
Russian Fed.	289	9	12	13	4%	Afghanistan	299	7	15	22	5%
Yugoslavia, FR	273	9	7	7	3%	Romania	906	20	12	17	1%
Albania	30	1	*	4	13%	Armenia	823	18	*	4	0%
Czech Rep.	178	6	*	3	2%	Bangladesh	13	0	*	4	23%
Lithuania	42	1	*	3	7%	Rwanda	3	0	*	3	67%
D.R. Congo	27	1	*	2	7%	Somalia	8	0	*	3	25%
Iran, Islamic Rep. of	50	2	*	2	4%	Albania	1	0	*	1	100%
Iraq	62	2	*	2	3%	Bulgaria	823	18	*	1	0%
Somalia	28	1	*	2	7%	Georgia	340	7	*	1	0%
Other	981	31	11	12	1%	Other	220	5	7	10	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,170</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>4,589</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2%</b>

**Notes**  
 Source: Governments, compiled by UNHCR.  
 An asterisk indicates that the value is between 0 and 5.

