Media brief

One child dies or disappears every day attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean to reach Europe

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Overview

Approximately 3,500 children have died or disappeared attempting to cross the central Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy over the past 10 years, according to new UNICEF estimates.

This is equivalent to around one child losing their life every day over a decade. These children are among the more than 20,800 people who have died or disappeared on this perilous migration route.

This estimate is derived by applying the child proportion of arrivals (16.7 per cent) to the total number of people reported missing on the same route during this period.

Many shipwrecks leave no survivors or go unrecorded. This means that the true number of people, including children, who have died or disappeared is practically impossible to verify – and likely much higher. The vast majority of those who died or go missing are never identified, so information about their profiles is even harder to come by or verify.

While arrivals occur on the route year-round, it is from April that they tend to begin accelerating, reaching a peak over the summer. That makes it crucial to step up coordinated, concrete efforts now.

Over the past 10 years, children have accounted for around one in six of all people trying to cross to Italy via the central Mediterranean. Most children – around seven in 10 – travel alone, without their parents or legal guardians. Past data has shown that eight in 10 children and young people traveling along the Central Mediterranean Route experience exploitation, including violence, abuse, sexual exploitation, forced labour, child marriage and captivity.

Cover image: © UNICEF/UNI443177/Corti Unaccompanied children sit together at the 'hotspot' reception centre in Lampedusa while they wait to be transferred to other reception facilities. September 2023.

Shipwrecks

It has been 10 years since a shipwreck killed more than 1,000 adults and children off the Italian coast.

On the morning of Saturday, 18 April 2015, around 1,050 people boarded a boat in Libya, hoping to reach European shores. Instead, at nightfall, the boat capsized. Hundreds of people – including children – were locked in the hold. Only 28 people survived.

The 2015 shipwreck should have been a moment in which all countries and communities with the power to do so came together to protect children in countries of origin, transit and upon arrival, ensuring that they can safely seek protection and reunite with their family members.

Instead, over the decade since, countless shipwrecks have killed thousands of children.

In early September 2024, around 20 people died when their small, wooden boat capsized "repeatedly" in the waters off the coast of Lampedusa. People were left clinging to the side of the boat as their family members, including three children, drowned around them.

On 11 December 2024, an 11-year-old girl was found floating alone in the sea, wearing a life jacket made of tyre tubes, after 44 other passengers on her boat had drowned. She had no drinking water or food. A doctor determined she had been in the water for at least 12 hours. She told rescuers that the boat sank in a storm after departing from Sfax, Tunisia. Her brother and cousin who were traveling with her drowned.

On 31 December 2024, more than 20 people disappeared when their small boat sank off the coast of Lampedusa. Among the seven survivors was an eight-year-old child whose mother was missing, presumed dead.

On 26 January 2025, a shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa killed two children, leaving a third missing.

These are just some of the many shipwrecks, tragedies, and deaths that have occurred in the central Mediterranean in recent months.

Above: © UNICEF/UNI443172/Antonioli A damaged boat surrounded by debris lies upside down below the water line at the Favaloro pier, the main landing point on the island of Lampedusa, Italy. September 2023.

Why do children migrate?

The forces that drive children from their homes include war and conflict, other forms of personal and targeted violence, and the pressing need to escape poverty. Why children migrate, how they migrate and where they end up are all shaped by these and other factors, including gender, inequality and more. But in every case, travelling alone increases their vulnerability to discrimination, abuse, violence and exploitation.

A lack of options fuelled by desperation to escape war, conflict and violence leads many children to take dangerous routes to get to their destinations, increasing their vulnerability and exploitation at the hands of people smugglers and traffickers. While on the move, children may face harsh environmental conditions, and a lack of adequate shelter, food, water and sanitation and healthcare, as well as the ever-present threat of violence and death. Boys and girls who are displaced from their homes face heightened vulnerabilities to exploitation, violence and abuse whilst in transit and at their intended destination.

Some children are more vulnerable than others, including those travelling alone and those undertaking the longest journeys. Migration routes can be particularly dangerous for adolescent girls. Many already are fleeing violence, including child marriage, in their home country, or may be being trafficked, and they face severe risks of gender-based violence (GBV) before, during and after migration.

Women and girls face the pervasive risk of sexual violence on migration routes to Europe. Boys are also reported to be subjected to such violence during their journeys.

During periods of increased arrivals, children arriving in Europe are regularly housed in overcrowded and inadequate reception facilities – often with adults, and with little privacy.

Above: © UNICEF/UNI443183/Antonioli Unaccompanied children and adolescents are transferred from the Lampedusa 'hotspot' intake centre to other reception facilities. September 2023.

Data collected in 2023 by IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF found that, of children and young people, during their journey:

54%

More than half experienced physical violence.

63%

Nearly two in three suffered from lack of food.

59%

Nearly six in 10 were robbed.

31%

Almost one in three were held at a location against their will, frequently including kidnappings and requests for ransom.

42%

More than four in 10 lacked shelter.

36%

More than one in three reported to have worked without getting the expected payment.

14%

More than one in eight was forced to work against their will

13%

More than one in eight was attacked by strangers

Hannah's story

Hannah was just 15 years old when her mother died, leaving her all alone. Making a life for herself in Nigeria seemed impossible. So when someone she trusted told her there was a better way, she believed them. She was told she could travel from her home in Nigeria to Europe, where she could fulfil her dreams of studying, in less than two weeks.

Instead, the "friend" turned out to be a trafficker – and the journey took 1.5 years. It included a trek across the desert, going without food or water for days at a time, and exploitation. "Everything that happened, everything you heard, was terrifying. You knew you could be next," she says. "I came to know true horror, people who caused harm and forced others to do the same, completely indifferent to anyone's pain."

Finally, on the coast of Libya, Hannah boarded a boat – only for its engine to fail, leaving it stalled, almost immediately. She survived, and boarded another boat the following night. It began to take on water, but this time, she and her fellow passengers were rescued and brought to a reception center in Southern Italy.

Today, nine years later, Hannah has, despite all odds, made her dream come true: she is studying at university. The 24-year-old also advocates for women and migrants, including by serving on the Steering Committee for UNICEF's U-Report On The Move platform, a listening and participation channel for adolescent and young migrants and refugees in Italy.

Above: © UNICEF/UNI443211/Antonioli The island of Lampedusa seen from an Italian Coast Guard boat patrolling the Mediterranean Sea. September 2023..

UNICEF's support for children with mixed migration status and those seeking asylum in Europe

UNICEF works with governments and other partners to strengthen national systems for child protection, social protection and migration and asylum. Our aim is to reduce the risks faced by children affected by all forms of migration and displacement in Europe and ensure their long-term support.

Meanwhile, we work to meet their immediate humanitarian needs for protection, education, health, nutrition and participation. We work with countries to ensure the protection of children from violence, abuse and exploitation, and support governments and service providers on case management and child-friendly reception services.

We work with civil society organizations to ensure children can access the psychosocial and other community-based child protection support they need through child-friendly spaces and women and girls' safe spaces.

No child should ever be detained for immigration purposes. We call for policies to end child immigration detention, drawing on national data and other evidence to make the case, while helping national authorities to build or strengthen alternatives to detention.

In Italy, where most children who arrive are unaccompanied, UNICEF has worked with the authorities to improve protection standards and monitoring mechanisms in centres for unaccompanied children. With UNICEF support, Italy has built a network of legal guardians for these children – a process that is now being replicated in Greece. We also call for timely relocation, family reunification and other solutions for children.

UNICEF has supported the training of social workers and other frontline service providers to ensure children are protected and that the risk of violence against them is reduced. We also work with governments to ensure that children have access to public schools and healthcare, paving the way towards their social inclusion.

We track progress, trends and changes, aiming to increase the availability of data on refugee and migrant children to inform advocacy, programming and reporting, upholding our accountability towards the children we serve and our donors.

Finally, we aim to amplify the voices of children affected by migration. In Italy, for example, we have worked with the U-Report On The Move social messaging tool to ensure their active participation in the issues that concern them.

Recommendations

Safe, legal and accessible pathways for migration and international protection continue to be needed.

UNICEF urges enhanced, child-sensitive search and rescue operations to prevent deaths at sea. Upon arrival, every child must be provided with immediate legal representation and robust safeguards. Restrictions on movement should never result in a child being detained in an immigration facility – whether during screening, border, asylum or return procedures.

Urgent action is needed to close the continuing gaps between government commitments to children affected by migration and displacement and their everyday reality, with many of them still denied their most fundamental rights.

Migration and asylum policy is currently high on the public and political agenda. Today's debates are opportunities to highlight the acute risks faced by migrant and displaced children and make a strong case for their protection, drawing on the policy and legal frameworks already in place. There is an historic opportunity to strengthen national and EU protection, education and health systems to recognize and uphold the rights of all children, regardless of their migration status.

UNICEF calls for six actions to protect all children affected by migration and displacement.

1. Protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence.

2. End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating.

3. Keep families together as the best way to protect children.

4. Ensure that all refugee and migrant children keep learning and have access to health and other quality services.

5. Press for action on the underlying causes of large-scale forced displacement, and factors contributing to irregular migration.

6. Promote measures to protect and include children, including by combatting xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries of origin, transit and destination.

Above: @ UNICEF/UNI443194/Antonioli A child and his father, both from Tunisia, sit near Italian Red Cross tents at the 'hotspot' reception centre on the island of Lampedusa, Italy. September 2023.

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