



Refugee Digest 43

July 13th 2020

Youth & Child Refugees and Migrants

Mobile children and youth are a particularly vulnerable group within an already fragile community of displaced persons. In recent weeks the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has further destabilised their situations has become a cause of heightened concern. The phrase 'at high risk' has been used to describe them. The risks range from greater vulnerability to exploitation to the risk of detention especially for those caught mid-journey, and of abandonment by smugglers and others as they find traditional routes closed during lockdowns. Those in detention and at immigration centres are at greater risk due to physical proximity and lack of social distancing.

<https://www.triplepundit.com/story/2020/covid-19-migrant-children/120641>

These dangers are pointed out in a study of children being returned to Central American countries during the pandemic.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/mexico/covid-19-dangers-mount-migrant-children-forcibly-returned-northern-central-america-and>

A recent document states that "South Africa is a major destination for migrant children on the move from countries throughout Eastern and Southern Africa. According to UNICEF's latest Data Snapshot of Migrant and Displaced Children in Africa, more than 642 000 migrant or displaced children currently live in South Africa, making it the country with the largest child migrant population on the continent. South Africa's mixed movements include refugees, asylum-seekers, victims of trafficking, smuggled migrants and unaccompanied and separated minors."

<https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/unicef-and-south-african-red-cross-partner-assist-migrant-children>

Again from South Africa: "The lack of national data on the numbers of unaccompanied and separated migrant children prevents national authorities from fully planning for their care and protection." Protection remains one of the key challenges and most basic needs for young people.

<https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/press-releases/unicef-and-south-african-red-cross-partner-assist-migrant-children>

Statistics updated last month (June 2020) show that, worldwide, 13.9% of migrants were under the age of 18 and a further 11% consisted of youth between 19 and 24 years of age. Children's numbers increased from 28.7m in 1990 to 37.8m in 2019. Africa hosts the largest population of child and youth migrants.

<https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/child-and-young-migrants>

From analyses in Europe and the USA the key emerging concerns are around child protection to guard against extreme vulnerability to sexual abuse, trafficking, and gender-based violence. In some parts of Europe campaigns were launched in migrant centres to keep children safe. Fears are rife that curbs on civil liberties in order to limit the spread of the virus could have adverse effects on child safety.

https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_101735.html

https://www.unicef.org/eca/topics/refugee-and-migrant-children?items_per_page=All

<https://www.unicef.org/eca/emergencies/refugee-and-migrant-children-europe>

The emerging way of looking at young refugees (in theology, the 'hermeneutic') is to see them as people with resources and potential, and not just as people in need causing a strain on the host countries and thus viewed with suspicion.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-rule-of-law/-/border-protection-and-the-rights-of-young-refugees-and-children-in-focus>

A key area of concern for young people is that of mental health. Trauma undermines mental health. The sociological framework for understanding this includes models where the authors conceptualize the developing child as "living within concentric circles that include family, school, neighbourhood, and society, embedded within a cultural context. Mental health providers identify and provide targeted support to combat disruptions within any or all of these ecological layers."

<https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4317536>

With regard to COVID-19 and vulnerable children, "the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic could push as many as 86 million more children into poverty by the end of 2020", a joint study by Save the Children and UNICEF showed in May this year.

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-28/Pandemic-puts-up-to-86-mln-children-at-risk-of-poverty-UNICEF-QRidQX1WF2/index.html>

The number of children displaced within their own countries by violence and conflict reached a record 19 million in 2019, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) says in a report published in May 2020. The report warns that the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to undermine still further these children's already precarious existence. Syria, the Yemen and the Democratic Republic of the Congo house a third of all displaced children. Other African countries such as Nigeria, Sudan and Somalia house more than a million children per country.

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-06/Conflicts-push-children-displaced-internally-to-all-time-high-UNICEF-QgBtgoHd70/index.html>

This article also looks at the way in which the lives of children on the move are further disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/migrant-and-displaced-children-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>

In a comment recently, the Secretary General of the UN, Dr Antonio Guterres, noted that according to the latest statistics for victims of Trafficking in Persons, a third of all victims are children. This includes children abducted to become child soldiers, children exploited sexually and children forced into labour.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/children-bear-brunt-of-human-trafficking-un-chief/1544932>

Finally, Pope Francis has said that migrants are not numbers, but persons with feelings who need ongoing protection, adding that particular concern must be shown for migrant children and their families.

<https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/06/pope-francis-calls-for-protection-for-immigrant-children-and-their-families/>

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