

POLICY BRIEF: CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

September, 2023

Overview

There are more children on the move than ever before. In June 2023, [UNICEF reported](#) that 43.3 million children were displaced either internally or across international borders. Forty percent of all forcibly displaced persons are currently under the age of 18. Most displaced children will spend their [entire lives](#) in displacement, facing risks to their protection and disrupted access to education, health care, social protection, and mental health and psychosocial support services.

National, state, and local governments have the responsibility to protect children on the move, regardless of where they are from or where they are going. However, social protection systems are often overwhelmed and unable to respond to the scale of need. Civil society and community-based responses are key to building and sustaining protective factors for children in communities of origin, along the migratory route, in receiving communities, and upon return, but these are also underfunded and over capacity.

The dominant discourse around migration centers on law enforcement and border security. Children's best interests are often a secondary consideration. Stakeholders must work together to ensure the rights of children on the move and meet the pressing needs of children and their families experiencing displacement. Policymakers can take steps to prioritize coordinated child-sensitive approaches and improve responses in countries of origin, along the migratory route, and in destination communities.

“Children on the move” is an [umbrella term](#) that includes child migrants; children in need of international protection, such as refugees and asylum-seekers; internally displaced children; stateless children; and child survivors of cross-border trafficking. Every child has the same needs and rights: protection, health, nutrition, education, and connection with caring adults. These are best met through flexible and holistic responses that center the interests of the child and are informed by those with lived experience.

Although children on the move experience adversity and vulnerability, they also demonstrate [tremendous resilience](#) and develop skills to navigate complexity and hardship. Their strengths and capacities should be recognized by all stakeholders.

Needs of Children on the Move

Ensuring Protection

Children on the move may face [increased risks](#) of violence, abuse, bodily harm, psychological trauma, and various forms of exploitation during their journeys and in destination communities. Such risks are even more pronounced for unaccompanied children and those separated from their families and can be exacerbated depending on age, gender, ethnicity, and [disability status](#).



Children with uncertain legal status or who lack legal identity documents often have **significant difficulties** accessing services and support. Children on the move may be placed in **detention facilities**, and can experience risks associated with staying in overcrowded transit centers or refugee camps. They may also face discrimination and economic uncertainty, which can impede access to critical services, and increase incidences of exploitative child labor and early or forced marriage. Many live under constant threat of deportation, even when this might violate international law.

Continuing Learning

Today, **224 million children** affected by crises require educational support, including more than 72 million who are unable to attend school, exacerbating the ongoing global learning crisis—**70% of 10-year olds** cannot read or understand a basic sentence. Displaced children overwhelmingly want to continue their education but **face significant barriers**, including discrimination and overcrowding in host communities.

Education protects children and builds **sustainable futures**, social networks, and resilience over the long term. Child care centers and schools should be safe spaces for children to re-establish a sense of stability and **access** health, nutrition, and protection programs. Schools offer **an opportunity** for children to adapt and integrate into host communities. This is especially true when displaced children are integrated into national education systems. Education for children on the move can also **reduce** risks of child labor, child, early, and forced marriage, and adolescent pregnancy.

Understanding Trauma and Building Resilience

Many children on the move, particularly those who have journeyed unaccompanied or have been separated from their families, need mental health and psychosocial support to alleviate **challenges** arising from adversity and the loss of family members and friends. Trauma-informed and resilience-oriented mental health and psychosocial support is important for children and their caregivers throughout their migration journeys and in destination communities.

Recommendations

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General Recommendations:

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- ▶ Uphold all children's right to access protection, seek asylum, and remain and reunite with family members within and across borders.
- ▶ Ensure that policy and program responses for children on the move are centered around the best interests of the child standard, so that decisions around child-appropriate and trauma-informed care

and services, access to protection in a host or third country, family reunification, and return to their country are conducted in a child's best interest.

- ▶ Strengthen child-sensitive border and reception processes, including family- and community-based care and case management as alternatives to immigration detention. For unaccompanied children, increase the percentage of children in home-based or small-scale placements to foster children's safety and care in a family-like setting, appropriate to their needs.
- ▶ Inform decisions regarding assistance for children on the move with evidence-based research and disaggregated needs assessments, including sex, age, and disabilities.
- ▶ Support [Welcome Corps](#) and other initiatives to welcome newcomers into communities and promote measures to combat xenophobia and discrimination.
- ▶ Strengthen the Central American Minors (CAM) program by improving processing times and making the program more accessible and transparent for families.
- ▶ Ensure the continuation of timely family reunifications for vulnerable Afghans, particularly for unaccompanied Afghan minors (UAMs) and attached Afghan minors (AAMs), and ensure necessary support for UAMs and AAMs and their sponsors when reunification is not possible.
- ▶ In FY2024, allocate \$5.2 billion in funding for the Migration and Refugee Assistance account, \$5.27 billion for the International Disaster Assistance account, and \$11.19 billion for the Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) account to robustly fund resettlement and integration services (including support for unaccompanied refugee minors), and include at minimum \$8 billion to serve unaccompanied children within the overall request, as part of the annual appropriations bills.
- ▶ Strengthen coordination between international organizations; national, state, and local governments; and community partners to fortify protection and reporting mechanisms to prevent and respond to exploitation, violence, and abuse, and other child rights violations.
- ▶ Design policies and programs to provide children on the move with continuous access to education, health care, mental health and psychosocial support, case management, and legal services, and promote positive self-identity and belonging from the earliest ages.
- ▶ Invest in the capacity of local social-services agencies, schools, and medical and mental health providers to improve the continuity of services for unaccompanied children in local communities.

Recommendations for the forthcoming Global Refugee Forum:

The [Global Refugee Forum](#) (GRF) is an opportunity to take stock of progress and make a concerted global effort to uphold the rights of children on the move and ensure their needs are met. Pledges should consider the specific needs of the most marginalized children, including those with disabilities and religious, ethnic, or other traditionally excluded minorities.

- ▶ Provide innovative financing to meet the needs of children on the move, including through the World Bank's [Global Concessional Financing Facility](#) and [Window for Host Communities and Refugees](#), building on existing U.S. commitments.
- ▶ Sign on to the [multistakeholder pledge on child rights](#), pledging with and for children focused on four areas: child protection, social protection, protective and inclusive education, and empowerment and meaningful child participation.
- ▶ Co-host the high-level event on the child rights pledge with key stakeholders, including children, to discuss policy gaps in addressing the needs and rights of children on the move.
- ▶ Promote the prioritization of child rights across the implementation of all GRF pledges, including the multistakeholder pledge on [economic inclusion and social protection](#), and the pledge on [securing sustainable futures](#).

