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# Children and youth in mixed migration

## Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC's research and 4Mi data collection

This is the fourth in a series of state-of-play knowledge papers that address topical mixed migration issues and present key messages drawn from MMC's research, expert analysis, and 4Mi data. Previous key messages papers, available on our website, focused on [human smuggling](#), [drivers and decision-making](#), and [climate change and environmental stressors](#).

## Introduction

Many children are migrating in the hope of accessing new opportunities, improving their lives, or trying to find safety, with or without their parents or caregivers. According to UN DESA, one in every seven migrants was aged 19 or under in 2020, with some contexts recording higher proportions of children on the move, for example on certain migration routes, or among refugee populations where children account for 41% of those displaced. Youth (between the ages of 15 and 24) accounted for 11% of migrants worldwide in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

In general, these figures indicate that while children and youth make up a substantial proportion of the migrant population, they are technically underrepresented when considering the total number of migrants worldwide (where children make up approximately one-third, and youth 16% of the total global population). However, despite this relative underrepresentation, their distinct needs, as well as lack of knowledge and understanding about children and youth on the move, particularly those travelling within mixed migration movements, demands specific attention and has implications for policy and response.

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) systematically collects age-disaggregated data, and began specifically focusing on children and youth in 2017. This paper summarizes some key messages on the topic, and with an aim to provoke thoughts on how to address information gaps and take into account the specific dynamics, needs and vulnerabilities of children and youth travelling on mixed migration routes. Other organisations have also published studies and reports on children and youth. While such literature has influenced our thinking and contributed to this paper, this series of "state-of-play" knowledge papers presents MMC's own key messages and therefore does not include extensive references to external sources.

## Multiple barriers to understanding and responding to the needs of children in mixed migration

### Key message 1:

**Children are a hidden group within an already hard-to-reach population; this can make it more difficult to hear from them, and to know about and respond to their needs.**

People in mixed migration are among the hardest to reach populations in terms of research and response: due to their irregular status, they are rarely accounted for in official statistics and often wish to remain 'under-the-radar'. Added to this, being on the move compounds access challenges, and the mix of nationalities and languages spoken can also make connection and communication complex.

Children within mixed migration movements are still harder to reach. Access requires more resources, more safeguards, and specific skills both to conduct research among children and to respond to their needs. Unaccompanied children (travelling without a close family member or guardian) may have specific and high levels of vulnerability. However, as a relatively small group often seeking to remain undetected as a protective mechanism, they can be particularly difficult to reach, and to assist.

To understand and respond to the needs of children, organisations require skills in child-focused and sensitive approaches, but capacity and expertise are often lacking. Again, this is even more the case for unaccompanied children, as organisations face additional challenges in terms of gaining consent to engage in the absence of a legal guardian. This means that access to children, and even more so to unaccompanied children, is often very limited. This leaves many organisations with a dilemma: on the one hand, the need to put in place specific safeguarding and child-sensitive approaches, so

<sup>1</sup> IOM, [Protection of children in migration](#), accessed September 2023; Youth data from 2019, see IOM, [Child and young migrants](#), Migration Data Portal, accessed September 2023; UNICEF, [Child Displacement](#), accessed October 2023.

as to be able to ethically and safely work with children, is recognised. On the other hand, the lack of capacity needed to put in place these standards often mean researchers are unable to work directly with children, limiting our knowledge about their needs and impacting the organisation's ability to provide the right assistance.

Finally, the work to understand and respond to the needs of children and youth is complicated by overlapping or contrasting definitions. Not all countries or organisations have the same definition of a child, or a young person, meaning that the knowledge gained can be fragmented and hard to synthesise. MMC defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 (in line with the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move), and 'youth' as young adults aged 18-24.<sup>2</sup>

## Children and youth in the context of mixed migration are not a homogenous group, and youth are distinct from other adults

### Key Message 2:

**Children and youth engaged in migration are often incorrectly conceived of as a homogenous group, or have their needs conflated with general populations of people on the move. Children and youth share the diverse characteristics of the general migrant population, but also have other differences between them, not least their stage of development.**

There is a diversity among children and youth on the move that needs to be better understood and responded to – 'children on the move' is an important category, but also too generic, comprising a mixed population itself. Children cannot be treated as one group. Children, like adults, experience multiple and often intersecting factors that define their individual circumstances; they vary by gender, nationality, language, ethnicity, etc. Among minors, the developmental stage is an added factor: babies, children, and adolescents have very different characteristics and needs. Care arrangements are also key to the conditions and experiences of a child, and can significantly impact migration experiences and vulnerability to protection risks. For example, children

may travel with parents, older siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and cousins, but also family friends or adults met along their journey; they could be travelling in groups of minors; or they could be travelling alone. Appropriate disaggregation of data considering age, gender, and accompaniment status is needed, as is a nuanced approach to capture the complexity and diversity of children's situations while on the move.

Having reached adulthood, the needs of youth are often conflated with the needs of all adults in mixed migration movements, while organisations and states tend to adopt markedly contrasting approaches to children. In most national contexts, an individual loses access to certain entitlements and protections as soon as they turn 18. However, this does not mean that the individual no longer needs protection. The loss of specific supports may in fact increase a person's vulnerability, and young adults have specific needs related to their age. Just as for children, age disaggregation of data is needed among adults and is essential to ensure that analysis captures the specific needs of particular populations, including youth, and facilitates responses accordingly.

## Migration can separate families, but it is also often a means to bring them together

### Key Message 3:

**Family relationships are a key factor in migration decision-making; on the one hand migration can separate families; on the other it is often an important mechanism for family reunification, or for marriage. Both can have positive and negative effects on children and youth.**

Key drivers of migration, such as conflict and insecurity, often separate families at departure, resulting in different migration choices or opportunities for different family members, including children and youth separated from their caregivers. Further, the cost of migration, particularly across wider distances, can mean that families separate, having only resources to fund the journey for one or a few family members. In other cases, children and young people may deliberately choose separation, leaving their families because of violence and abuse. Separation can also occur along the migration route, and even virtual connections can be lost.

<sup>2</sup> International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (2023) [Children on the move: Key terms, definitions and concepts](#).



Families may decide the migration journey is too dangerous for children and an adult, often male family member, may travel first. Families may opt to fund the migration of younger family members, including in some cases minors, with the view that they may eventually be able to facilitate migration of the whole family once they reach their intended destination. This can be perceived as a positive opportunity for young people; but it can also impose a lot of pressure on young adults and older children, to take risks and 'succeed' in a migration journey in which the family has invested.

In other situations, children may be left in the care of extended family while their parents or primary carers migrate in search of livelihood opportunities to support their families back home. Indeed, most children do not migrate. Remittances sent home by parents, caregivers or other family members can help improve access to healthcare, housing, schooling and basic goods and services, for children in their countries of origin or in neighbouring third countries. Nonetheless, such separation can be extremely difficult and have negative effects.

On the other hand, migration is also often a path to family (re)unification. Children, alone or with their families, as well as young adults, often migrate to be with family members and relatives. Family reunification often plays an important role in decision-making in terms of destination selection. When families who have migrated or been displaced to neighbouring countries find themselves in protracted situations and limited access to education, employment and the fulfilment of their rights, the decision to move onward – and the intended destination – can be influenced by family links.

Such family links in destination can provide protection to children and youth on the move. However, pursuing regular family reunification pathways can be challenging. Where such regular pathways exist, the conditions and definitions of 'family' can be narrow, children and young people can struggle to submit the required documentation, meet financial costs, or comply with administrative delays. The more logistical barriers can make regular pathways de facto inaccessible, resulting in children, youth and their families instead opting for irregular migration, and related dangers.

Marriage has long been a reason for migration, and while migration can in some instances give women and girls more choice on who and when to marry, there are cases of young adults and older children migrating for arranged marriages. This migration strategy can involve both risks on the journey, as well as risks of abuse upon arrival, and can result in instances of child, early and forced marriage among girls and young women.

## Young adults report a mix of migration drivers

### Key Message 4:

**In general, children and youth are migrating for the same reasons as adult populations on the move. However, drivers are slightly more 'mixed' among young adults, and more say they had no alternative than to migrate in the way they did.**

In general, children and youth migrate for the same reasons as other migrants. For example, for factors relating to their economic situation, violence, conflict, and insecurity. Key among these drivers is a lack of livelihood opportunities, which is unsurprising given that youth are disproportionately impacted by unemployment in many countries around the globe, compared to the wider population.<sup>3</sup>

The drivers of migration are gendered: young women more often report migrating to pursue educational opportunities, for family reasons (to marry, or to escape inter-personal violence or forced marriage), and rights and freedoms than men, while young men more often reported that they are migrating in pursuit of better economic opportunities and supporting their families.

Many youths indicate to MMC that they perceive fewer avenues for solving the problems driving their migration from their country of origin, compared to the general adult population. It seems that young adults are making a slightly different calculation of their situation when deciding to migrate than older migrants and refugees: perhaps they feel they have more to lose by not moving, because of their age, and feel more ready to take the risk to engage in mixed migration. This requires more exploration.

<sup>3</sup> International Labour Organization (2022) [Global employment trends for youth 2022](#).

## Children are more vulnerable; but they can also have agency

### Key Message 5:

**In general, children are disproportionately vulnerable to the risks associated with migration. However, the specific intersections between age, and accompaniment status, directly inform a child's level of agency as well as their vulnerability to protection risks.**

As mentioned previously, children make up a much larger proportion of the more vulnerable refugee population (41%), than they do the overall migrant population (14%). In addition, due to their age, children are disproportionately vulnerable to the risks associated with migration. This includes the impacts of harsh terrain and conditions; physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; and labour exploitation, aggravated smuggling, trafficking, and detention. There are differences based on gender, with girls perceived to be at greater risk of verbal abuse, sexual violence and forced marriage throughout their migration journeys, while boys are perceived to be more at risk of detention and physical violence.

Nonetheless, children have different levels of vulnerability and agency: the intersection of age and accompaniment status plays a crucial role. Children of different ages demonstrate varying levels of agency in their decision to migrate, their choice of destination, and the way they travel. How they are accompanied or not is also crucial in assessing their vulnerability to risks along their journeys. Children may be with a trusted parent who assures all their needs are met; they may be in a situation of domestic abuse or exposed to exploitation by a caregiver; they may be protected by someone encountered on the journey; or they may be alone and at risk of exploitation and extortion by adults encountered along the way. Caregivers also face challenges on the migration journey, especially sole caregivers, which can impact children in their care.

For all migrants, financial resources can play a role in the level of exposure to abuse or danger: they can influence the route (and the safety of those routes), engagement with smugglers, and exploitation, including forced labour, trafficking, and debt bondage. Limited financial resources can also push children and youth – whether travelling with families or not – to seek employment in sectors where they are at risk of exploitation and abuse, or into abusive situations with smugglers, if unable to pay for services. Child labour that impedes development is a form of exploitation in itself, and the risks of further

exploitation in the workplace are higher for children precisely because they are children. Young adults who lack financial resources may be exposed to different risks than older adults. They may find it more difficult to obtain work; and their age combined with their lack of experience makes them more vulnerable to exploitation.

Identification of at-risk children, including unaccompanied children along journeys and in destination, is crucial in order to connect them with assistance and services.

## Children need protection, not detention

### Key Message 6:

**The criminalisation of migration has a particularly adverse impact on children, especially detention. Children who remain in the community, but who have a close family member in immigration detention also face severe negative impacts.**

In many countries, child protection systems lack the capacity to respond to children's needs. For child migrants, this lack of capacity is compounded by a lack of political will to assist, the criminalisation of irregular migrants, and the narrative that adults are passing as children in order to seek protection and the right to stay. In too many places, child migrants are being criminalised and detained.

Immigration detention often tears family structures apart by separating or preventing the reunification of families. For children, immigration detention has well-evidenced detrimental and long-lasting impacts on development, and physical and mental well-being. Even when children are not detained themselves, the detention of family members has a profound impact. Children with relatives in detention, are in a state of fear and concern for their family members and may be struggling to have their basic needs met in their absence. Further, the detention of family members can exacerbate children's fear and anxiety about their own risk of arrest and detention.

## A needs-based response to children and youth

### Key Message 7:

**Children and youth should be responded to in terms of need, rather than status.**

Specific efforts need to be made to understand and respond to the needs of children and youth on the move, because accompaniment status and age may not adequately predict the level of protection and need. It is important to measure a child or young person's capacity and agency: many young people manage to undertake long, arduous, and dangerous journeys, and take these journeys with hope and ambition for the future. Their life experience must be taken into account when assessing their needs, and flexibility in approaches – around how to assure protection, appropriate and alternative care arrangements, and access to money and employment – if responses are to effectively protect children and youth, and foster safe migration and positive development.

## Conclusion

Protection lies at the heart of MMC's work, and these key messages therefore focus on the needs and vulnerabilities of children and youth. To be able to provide adequate protection, we need improved capacity to learn about children and youth engaged in mixed migration, and to respond to their specific needs. At the same time, children and youth migrate with the ambition to improve their lives, gain new experiences, and learn. These positive elements within child and youth migration should not be lost amid the overriding concerns for their health and wellbeing.

# Annex 1: MMC resources on children and youth

MMC's key messages are based on the knowledge accumulated over years of research. Much of that research, and the data on which it is founded, is detailed in the publications listed below. [4Mi Interactive](#). MMC's dashboard of selected 4Mi data collected since 2020, also provides insights on youth, thanks to its age disaggregation function.

## 4Mi snapshots/infographics

- MMC, CDH and UNICEF (2023): [Children on the move through Honduras – Migration experiences and security risks](#)
- MMC and UNHCR (2023): [Refugee and migrant youth in Tunisia - Profiles, access to income, protection risks and assistance needs](#)
- MMC and UNHCR (2023): [Understanding the role of family reunification within mixed movements in Tunisia](#)
- MMC and UNHCR (2023): [Refugees and migrant youth in Sudan – Profiles, access to income, protection risks and assistance needs](#)
- MMC and UNHCR (2023): [Understanding the role of family reunification within mixed movements in Sudan](#)
- MMC and Save the Children (2023): [Refugee and migrant youth in Ethiopia – access to income, protection risks and assistance needs](#)
- MMC and Save the Children (2023): [Children and caregivers on the move in Ethiopia – Profiles, risks and needs](#)
- MMC and EJM (2023): [Refugees and migrants travelling with children in urban centres in West and North Africa](#)
- MMC and EJM (2023): [Youth on mixed migration routes in West and North Africa – Profiles and journeys overview](#)
- MMC (2022): [Profiles and needs of caregivers and children on the move in Tunisia](#)
- MMC (2022): [Profiles and needs of caregivers and children on the move in Sudan](#)
- MMC (2023): [Protection risks for Rohingya women and children: from departure country to arrival in Malaysia](#)
- MMC (2020): [COVID-19 Global Thematic Update #3 – Impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants with children](#)
- MMC (2019): [Young people on the move from East Africa](#)

## Articles

- RMMS (2014): [Djibouti's Child Migrants: Destitution, deportation and exploitation](#)
- RMMS (2014): [Hungering for Something Beyond: Youth aspirations in Somaliland](#)
- MMC (2023): [Migration experiences of children on the move through Honduras](#)
- PRRiA (2023): [Impact of Prolonged Immigration Detention on Rohingya Families and Communities in Malaysia](#)
- MMC and Save the Children (2021): [Migrating and displaced children and youth in Tunisia – Profiles, Routes, Protection, and Needs](#)
- MMC and Save the Children (2018): [Young and on the move in West Africa](#)
- MMP (2017): [In the best interest of the child? – Protecting UASC from the Middle East in France](#)
- MMP (2017): [On my own: Protection challenges for unaccompanied and separated children in Jordan, Lebanon and Greece](#)
- MMP (2017): [Underage, undocumented and alone: A gap analysis of undocumented unaccompanied and separated children on the move in Jordan, Lebanon and Greece](#)
- MMP (2016): [Women and girls on the move: A gender analysis of mixed migration from the Middle East to Europe](#)
- RMMS (2016): [Young and on the Move: Children and youth in mixed migration flows within and from the Horn of Africa](#)

## Reports and briefing papers





MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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