

Europe Is Losing Track of Child Refugees



Migrants passed through a makeshift tent camp in a park in Brussels last September as they waited to have their asylum claims processed. *Photo: EMMANUEL DUNAND/AFP/Getty Images*

By

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BRUSSELS—European governments are losing track of significant numbers of children who have entered the continent without their parents as refugees from war-torn areas in the Middle East and beyond.

In Belgium, authorities can't account for 156 migrant children who entered the country unaccompanied since January 2015, and the number is growing. This year, 90 unaccompanied migrant children have been reported missing to Child Focus, Belgium's center for missing and sexually exploited children.

The Belgian government has ensured that any minors in "difficult circumstances" have received assistance, said Sharon Beavis, a spokeswoman for the Justice Ministry. "The federal department of Justice remains committed to track, identify, register and assist any unaccompanied minors as best as possible," she said.

The figures from Belgium and other parts of Europe show unaccompanied children slipping through the cracks in Europe's social-safety net. Lone children, according to officials and advocates, remain at the greatest risk of falling victim to labor and sexual exploitation. Some officials also worry young refugees, including those who have disappeared, could be targeted for recruiting by Islamic State and other extremist groups.

In 2015, 88,245 unaccompanied children—91% of them boys—sought asylum in the European Union, and officials estimate that there are as many as 10,000 missing migrant children. This year, 90% of migrant children arriving in Italy were unaccompanied. Advocates say the families of children often pay smugglers in advance but often this depends on their nationality, with poorer migrants from Afghanistan or Eritrea forced to work for smugglers to pay for their passage.

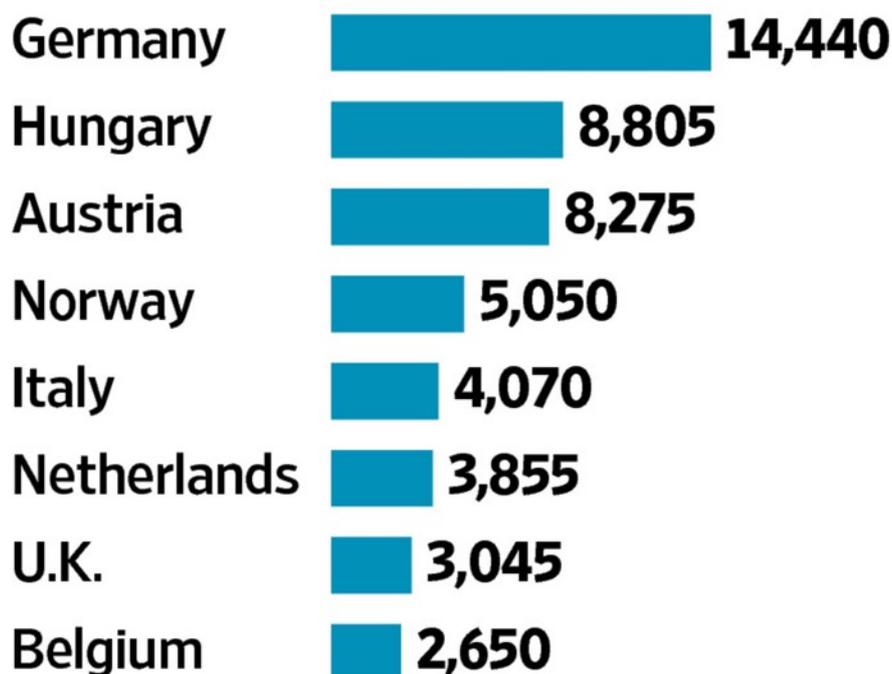
Thirteen-year-old Eritrean Samuel Senai arrived in Europe in May without his family. While crossing the Mediterranean, he witnessed some 100 migrants drown [when the boat behind his own capsized](#).

Hospitalized for shock in Italy, after a week he ran away and a fellow migrant paid for a smuggler to transport them to Milan. But once there, the migrant's sister demanded he reimburse her €250 (\$277) for the ride, and refused to let him leave. Samuel was allowed to go after his brother wired money to the woman, and he made his way alone to the Netherlands. He remains haunted by the entire experience, especially the sea crossing.

"Rather than being alone, it would have been better to have been with them, dead in the sea," he said in an interview.

Seeking Shelter

Asylum applications by unaccompanied minors, by country, in 2015



Source: Eurostat

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Social workers say they are seeing increasing numbers of very young children making the dangerous journey to Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. “The youngest we’ve had was 7,” said David Lowyck, director of the Belgian charity Minor Ndako, which provides round-the-clock residential care for unaccompanied minors. “Now you have much younger kids, from Afghanistan and Syria, usually between 8 and 13. That’s new for us.”

When an unaccompanied minor arrives in Belgium, he or she is supposed to be assigned a guardian, who acts as an advocate for migrant children in residential group homes, helping them secure legal status and assistance.

The influx of children during the past year exhausted the limited supply of volunteers, each of whom looks after as many as five children. Professional guardians can work with 25.

Since mid-2015, Belgium’s justice ministry has doubled its stock of volunteer guardians, to around 490. As of mid-June, some 450 minors were still waiting to be assigned a guardian, down from 900 in January.

Belgian advocates say the guardian system, when properly staffed, can work.



Toys and clothing were left at a tent in a Brussels refugee encampment. *Photo: EMMANUEL DUNAND/AFP/Getty Images*

Samuel Senai’s brother Medhane was 15 in 2013 when he left Eritrea for Europe. In Libya, he was beaten and forced to work caring for a smuggler’s horses to pay his way. Abandoned in Belgium by another smuggler and determined to reach the Netherlands, he was only stopped from fleeing the asylum center by his guardian, who convinced him of the benefits of applying for asylum in Belgium.

He is now trying to bring Samuel to Belgium. Despite his fears for his brother's safety on the journey, Medhane, now 18, said he had little choice but to have him come to Europe alone.

"I didn't want that he would come here, but he had no family, there wasn't anyone to send him to school," he said.

A 2016 Unicef report detailed the constant threat of sexual violence, forced prostitution and rape for lone migrant children in transit in Northern France, a danger that advocates say exists across Europe.

Mr. Lowyck said his center had received several migrant children who had survived rapes on their journeys. "We are always too late, we see kids who are traumatized, beaten, raped. When they arrive in Europe, the most difficult part of their journey begins," he said.

Mr. Meyers said police are informed immediately when a vulnerable child disappears. Only children under 13 are generally considered vulnerable, and, in line with asylum center regulations, teenagers are only reported missing 24 hours after they disappear.

Mr. Lowyck said European governments must do more to prevent migrant children from traveling alone within Europe.

"Some of the worst trauma is happening once they enter Europe," he said. "Kids are more and more desperate. The smugglers know this."

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