



# Unaccompanied and Separated Children



## About CWS

Church World Service (CWS) is a faith-based organization transforming communities around the globe through just and sustainable responses to hunger, poverty, displacement, and disaster. Our vision is a world where all have food, voice, and a safe place to call home.

## A Vision and Mission Based in Human Rights

Within the context of our work, CWS defines Protection as encompassing all efforts pursued by humanitarian and human rights actors to ensure that the rights of affected persons and obligations under international and national law are understood, respected, protected, and fulfilled without discrimination, as per the Sphere Association Standards<sup>1</sup>.

Our vision and mission reflect a commitment to the full and equal respect for the rights of all individuals, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, social, religious, or other background. This includes prioritizing and working in partnership with people who experience social and economic marginalization and discrimination, recognizing that children can often be in the most precarious situations, as they are disproportionately affected by threats and risks.

## Data, Frameworks and Commitments toward UASC Protection

Comprehensive global data on unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) is not systematically collected and disseminated,

### Who and where are unaccompanied and separated children?

An unaccompanied child is a person under the age of 18 who is separated from both parents and not cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so.

A separated child is separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives.<sup>2</sup>

- In 2021, 145,000 UASC were encountered at the US-Mexico border.
- In 2020, 14,000 UASC applied for asylum in Europe. It is likely that many children do not apply for asylum.
- In 2020, 62% of the 16,750 children arriving in Greece, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Malta were unaccompanied.

## Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children

The inter-agency principles on UASC, drafted in 2004 by six leading humanitarian organizations, draw on international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, and are intended to inform actions and decisions related to UASC in humanitarian contexts.

Child rights principles reflected in the UASC principles include:

- Preserving family unity
- The best interests of the child
- Valuing the child's opinion
- Non-discrimination
- The special needs of girls

Humanitarian practice principles reflected in the UASC principles include:

- Using an overall protection framework
- Complementarity and cooperation among organizations
- Making a long-term commitment to this work

*\*See footnote 4*

but available country and regional data suggest that large numbers of children are on the move without the care and protection of their parents or other caregivers (see box, p. 1). UASC face heightened risks of abduction, trafficking, exploitation, and illegal adoption; sexual exploitation and abuse; physical violence and harmful practices, including child marriage; sexual violence; detention; child labor; recruitment by armed forces and armed groups; and lack of access to asylum procedures.<sup>3</sup> UASC with disabilities may be even more vulnerable to these harms.

International and national laws and policies establish the responsibility of governments to ensure that children's rights to care and protection are met, including in situations where children may become separated from parents or other caregivers or have already been separated from them. Governments often fulfill these responsibilities in partnership with international organizations and non-governmental organizations like CWS.

Key sets of actions to support UASC include preventing separation, tracing separated families and reunifying children and families when in the child's best interest, providing immediate care and support for unaccompanied children, facilitating long-term care solutions when needed, and monitoring and following up children supported by these actions to ensure they are safe and well-cared-for.<sup>4</sup>

As with all children, feeling safe, having stability, and being nurtured are important elements for the multi-dimensional wellbeing of those who are unaccompanied.<sup>5</sup>

CWS recognizes the importance of facilitating meaningful child participation and having appropriate mechanisms to include the views and perspectives of children and youth as a critical element of understanding their best interests. Also vital is access to education and ensuring that the appropriate accommodations are available to successfully integrate children and youth into communities.

For CWS, advocacy is critical to making contributions that have an integral impact on the lives of unaccompanied and separated children and youth.

<sup>1</sup> Sphere Association. The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, Fourth Edition (Geneva: 2018), [www.spherestandards.org/handbook](http://www.spherestandards.org/handbook).

<sup>2</sup> Susanna Corona Maioli and Kol Wikramage, "Unaccompanied or separated children face increased health risks during migration," Migration Data Portal, July 2022. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/unaccompanied-or-separated-children-face-increased-health-risks-during-migration-0>.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Upphard and Lili Birnbaum, Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children. Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2016; Sarah Upphard and Lili Birnbaum, Toolkit on Unaccompanied and Separated Children. Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2017. <http://alliancecpha.org/en/unaccompanied-and-separated-children#resources>.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children UK, United Nations Children's Fund; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, World Vision International, Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children. Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, 2004. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/children/4098b3172/inter-agency-guiding-principles-unaccompanied-separated-children.html>.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, Best Practices for Working with Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Humanitarian Contexts: A Guide for Staff and Volunteers in the United States, 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/media/114286/file/Best-practices-working-with-unaccompanied-migrant-children.pdf>



## Youth as Migrants or Refugees

Young people over the age of 18, who are, or become, young adults as migrants or refugees experience conflict, danger, and loss that can affect their development. They experience many of the heightened vulnerabilities that affect children, such as neglect, extreme poverty and food insecurity, physical and sexual abuse, exploitation, trafficking, torture, and violence. They may also miss out on opportunities to prepare for an engaged and productive adulthood. Separation from family can exacerbate these vulnerabilities and contribute to mental health challenges, so helping youth reconnect with their families, if possible and appropriate, is important.<sup>6</sup> Core elements of support for migrant or refugee young people include support for wellbeing (such as psychosocial and mental health support, safe places, and opportunities to develop friendships and peer networks), opportunities for education and employment, or employment preparation, community engagement, and involvement in determining what programming and support will best meets their needs.<sup>7</sup>

## Our Work with Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Youth

\*CWS has included youth (18+) to visualize the risks, needs, and our contribution to migrant and refugee youth, considering there is a relevant gap when a child ages out and transitions from being considered a child before 18 and becoming a young adult.



### Ensuring care and support for Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Youth (UASCY) in Indonesia

Since 2008, CWS has provided support for Unaccompanied and Separated Children and Youth (UASCY) in Indonesia through alternative care arrangements including group homes, supported independent living, and fostering. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Indonesia reports a total population of 12,704<sup>8</sup> refugees and asylum-seekers from approximately 50 countries, the majority coming from Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Somalia. As of May 2023, 27% of the total number of people registered with UNHCR in Indonesia are

<sup>6</sup> Elmore Borbon, D., Tant, E., and Rosado, J., Children, Youth, and Families Who Experience Migration-Related Trauma and Family Separation. Los Angeles, CA and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, 2021. [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/children\\_youth\\_and\\_families\\_who\\_experience\\_migration\\_related\\_trauma\\_and\\_family\\_separation.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/children_youth_and_families_who_experience_migration_related_trauma_and_family_separation.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Mercy Corps, Young People in the Global Compact on Refugees: How the Global Compact on Refugees Can Protect Young Refugees and Prove Their Potential, October 2017. [https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/resources/Mercy%20Corps\\_Young%20People%20in%20the%20Global%20Compact%20on%20Refugees\\_Oct%202017.pdf](https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/resources/Mercy%20Corps_Young%20People%20in%20the%20Global%20Compact%20on%20Refugees_Oct%202017.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR Representation in Indonesia, Monthly Statistical Report, May 2023. UNHCR Indonesia



children, 142 children were unaccompanied by a parent or an adult caregiver and 59 children were separated from their parents but had an adult caregiver with them.

The CWS Protecting Urban Refugees through Empowerment – PLUS (PURE+) project (FY 2022-2025), funded by the United States Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, supports protection and care for UASCY in the Jakarta area and strengthens refugee-led organizations (RLO) to provide inclusive education services. Many RLOs are

already providing learning spaces for refugees that could not access formal school, and with the support from CWS RLOs will be able to enhance the quality of learning and to reach more refugee children of various ages and country of origin.

PURE+ provides best interests determination, case planning and management, and a safe group home for up to 25 highly vulnerable unaccompanied boys aged 9 to 18 who will ultimately transition into foster care or supported independent living arrangements. This entails providing round-the-clock security, access to household essentials (utilities, dormitories, hygiene and bathing, cooking), cash living allowances, social worker support, access to education and vocational training through classes and, health care, trained caretakers, peer-to-peer and refugee-community support, protection information sessions and individualized plans.

CWS also provides transition support to young adults including education/vocational activities, access to health and mental health care, information sessions on health, a time-limited cash allowance, and informational, instrumental, and emotional support to build self-reliance and reduce social isolation.

## CWS's work with children and youth refugees and migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Transit countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) play a unique role in the global migration landscape. Managing migration flows in BiH involves navigating strained resources, legal complexities, international pressures, and impacts on local communities. UASC face specific challenges in transit countries like BiH, these include lack of legal status, vulnerability to exploitation, limited access to support services, fear of detention, deportation or pushbacks, absence of legal representation, limited social support, and uncertainty about their future. UASC who arrive in BiH are mostly aged 14-17 and come from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and African countries.

Building on experience developed with UASC since 2019, and with the mandate from the Ministry of Security and the local government's Social Welfare Centers, CWS currently operates a mobile team in Una-Sana Canton that assists UASC residing outside reception facilities. CWS identifies and assists UASC, providing guardianship services that enable needs assessment, links to essential food, medical, and shelter services, and transport to and accommodation in official reception facilities, if desired. CWS team also provides information on available support and services and safe migration. To date, CWS's mobile team has reached 750 UASC.

At present, CWS is conducting research with UASC in BiH and Serbia to gain insights into their experiences and challenges in transit, identify obstacles to integration and propose necessary adjustments to existing services, enhancing their overall effectiveness.

To better support UASC, CWS plans to conduct a mapping exercise of child protection actors and service providers in destination countries, with a particular focus on refugee-led organizations.

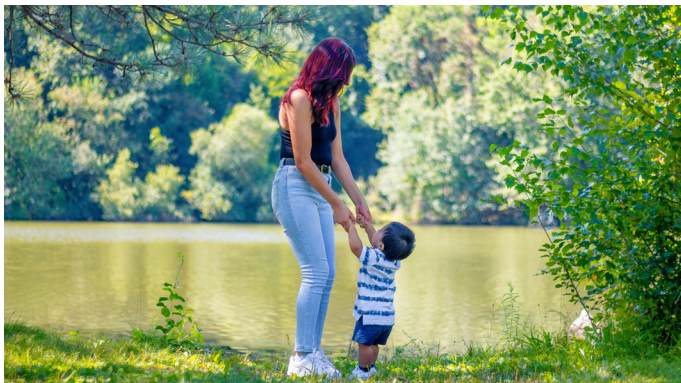
## Connecting migrants to support and services in Serbia



In Serbia, InfoPark – a CWS partner – implements the Migrant Protection & Assistance Program which supports migrants of all ages with special attention to UASC. Through outreach efforts in Belgrade and at unofficial shelters near the border areas with Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria and North Macedonia it offers urgent needs assessments for UASC, referrals to reception centers and state services including Social Welfare Centers, and referrals to legal guardians, asylum counseling and legal assistance for asylum applications. The program also offers life skills and language classes at the InfoPark’s Hub in Belgrade, cultural mediation and translation, safe transportation, and essential supplies whenever needed.



## Supporting Unaccompanied Children (UC) in the United States



Each year, tens of thousands of unaccompanied children seek refuge in the United States. Most are from El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras and are fleeing violence and threats to their safety. For many, the long and dangerous journey to the United States is just the beginning. After these children are released from Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)<sup>9</sup> custody and into the care of a sponsor, the transition is difficult as they adjust to new communities, cultures, languages, and caregivers (which may include families).

CWS partners with ORR to serve and support UC as they reunify with their sponsors in the United States. In our Home Study and Post Release Services program, CWS and our network of providers work closely with children and their sponsors. CWS ensures that children are reunified into safe placements and that sponsors are supported as they prepare for the new responsibilities. Though the length of services varies based on each child’s goals, CWS provides case management services and connects each child with available resources as they join their new communities.

In 2022, CWS worked alongside close to 3,500 children from 28 countries and so far in 2023, we have supported nearly 6,000. CWS supports smooth transitions for many children and additional support is needed to address the needs of children and their sponsors.

These needs include mental health services, legal representation, English language programs, vocational training opportunities, cultural integration support, and financial assistance to cover basic living expenses. For more information visit CWS’s website<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> The Office of Refugee Resettlement is an Office of the Administration for Children & Families within the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>10</sup> <https://cwsglobal.org/our-work/united-states/children-services/>

## Durable Solutions for UASC refugees through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP)



Since 1990, CWS has operated refugee processing in sub-Saharan Africa through a cooperative agreement with the United States Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (U.S. PRM). CWS Refugee Support Center (RSC) Africa assists PRM in processing applicants (including UASC) for possible admission to the U.S. as refugees. This admission or resettlement constitutes a durable solution for displaced populations who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution.

CWS RSC Africa interviews UASC applicants in the country of asylum and presents their cases to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) for adjudication. Once approved, CWS RSC Africa organizes their out-processing, including travel, reception, and placement in collaboration with USRAP partners. Since July 2021, CWS RSC Africa has resettled over 270 UASC, including 48 minors who reunited with their biological parents after years of separation and 22 children who joined the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program upon arrival in the United States.

CWS RSC Africa works closely with PRM, UNHCR, and other USRAP partners to ensure the best interests of the child are safeguarded and upheld throughout the USRAP process. This includes deploying experienced resettlement processing staff through CWS RSC Africa's Africa Regional Deployment Unit (ARDU) to assist UNHCR in conducting Best Interest Determinations for children and determining the need for a durable solution for unaccompanied and separated refugee children through the USRAP. CWS RSC Africa also routinely reviews and updates USRAP processing guidance and trainings to ensure interviews are child-friendly and best practices are adhered to while closely monitoring case movement and child protection considerations. Prior to their departure to the United States, CWS RSC Africa provides UASC and other minors and youth with specially tailored cultural orientation classes. This training assists minors in developing a realistic expectation of life in the United States and equips them with the skills for them to have a positive experience upon arrival.

## Services to refugee unaccompanied children and youth in Cairo



Since 2014, CWS with U.S. PRM funding, has partnered with Saint Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) in Cairo to provide services to refugee unaccompanied children and youth. StARS provides comprehensive services to refugee unaccompanied children and youth addressing medical, mental health, or social needs, such as shelter, security, community support, education, and general wellbeing and integration in Cairo. During 2022, 6,819 unaccompanied children and youth were served.

Services and activities include:

1. Information and support to access medical services, housing, practical assistance, and community links.
2. Guidance and information about UNHCR and service providers in Cairo.
3. Psychosocial and emotional support.
4. Sports and social activities.
5. Specialized education programs.
6. Employment and/or professional development opportunities for aged-out unaccompanied youth.
7. Other programs include Young Mothers Psychosocial Program and Direct Assistance Program.

In 2017 a Youth Advisory Board was created to enhance communication between youth staff, supervisors, and StARS management. Beyond being a tool for communication, it is also designed as a pathway for meaningful youth participation in the development of StARS as an organization, particularly in programming related to youth. The board is established by youth 17 to 24 years of age who arrived in Cairo as UASC. Youth meet regularly with StARS leadership to provide feedback from UA children and youth on programmatic and operations issues. They also meet with donors/delegations.

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## Resources for Further Learning and Exploration

- Inter-Agency Guiding Principles for Separated and Unaccompanied Children (2004)  
<https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/1101-inter-agency-guiding-principles-unaccompanied-and-separated-children>
- Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit (2013)  
<http://alliancecpha.org/en/materiel-technique/interagency-working-group-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-2013-alternative-care-emergencies-toolkit>
- Inter Agency Guidelines for Case Management and Child Protection (2014)  
<http://alliancecpha.org/en/technical-materials/inter-agency-guidelines-case-management-and-child-protection>
- Guidelines on Children's Reintegration (2016)  
<https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/guidelines-childrens-reintegration>
- Field Handbook on Unaccompanied and Separated Children (2017)  
[http://alliancecpha.org/sites/default/files/technical/attachments/handbook-web-2017-0322\\_3.pdf](http://alliancecpha.org/sites/default/files/technical/attachments/handbook-web-2017-0322_3.pdf)
- Toolkit on Unaccompanied and Separated Children (2017)  
<http://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-online-library/toolkit-unaccompanied-and-separated-children>
- Minimum Standards for the Protection of Children, Adolescents and Women in Refugee Accommodation Centers (2017)  
<https://www.unicef.de/informieren/materialien/minimum-standards-refugees/119842>
- Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019)  
<https://spherestandards.org/resources/minimum-standards-for-child-protection-in-humanitarian-action-cpms/>
- Guidelines on Supervised Independent Living for Unaccompanied Children (2019)  
<https://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/61bc48844/guidelines-supervised-independent-living-unaccompanied-children.html>
- Unaccompanied and Separated Children Information Sheet (March 2022)  
<http://alliancecpha.org/sites/default/files/technical/attachments/Alliance%20UASC%20Tipsheet%20v1.pdf>
- Four Strategies to Improve Community Services for Unaccompanied Children in the United States (2022)  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/strategies-community-services-unaccompanied-children?eTy pe=EmailBlastContent&eld=7962ecc5-95bc-4f40-8a50-e6c69d5c8a19>
- ORR UC program policy guide  
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/policy-guidance/unaccompanied-children-program-policy-guide>
- UNHCR's Children on the Run report  
<https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/children-run-full-report>
- MPI strategies for improving post release services  
Research: Four Strategies to Improve Community Ser.. | migrationpolicy.org
- USCRI's Where We Stand  
The Children of Tomorrow - USCRI (refugees.org)

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CWS Technical Program Briefs describe CWS's approach to a particular technical area or sector and situate it within existing global frameworks, standards, or best practices.

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