

SUMMIT REPORT

**Best practices and key
challenges on interagency
cooperation to safeguard
unaccompanied children
from going missing**



Missing
Children
Europe



Centre for the
Study of
Missing Persons

NIDRS
programma voor de politie



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CHILDREN
The Netherlands

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TUJSLA



Co-funded by the
European Union

SUMMIT: Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors
from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and
Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation

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The SUMMIT project was implemented by Missing Children Europe (BE) in cooperation with the University of Portsmouth (UK), NIDOS (NL), Defence for children-ECPAT (NL), TUSLA (IR), KMOP (EL) and Child Circle (BE). Associate Partners of SUMMIT are Telefono Azzurro (IT), Child Focus (BE), Missing People (UK), Consortium "Hope for Children" UNCRC Policy Centre (CY), Fundacion Anar (ES) and The Smile of the Child (EL).

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“The problem with a lot of cases of young unaccompanied minors going missing is it’s just not always prioritised as it would be if it was a child from our country, unfortunately. There’s a real cynicism in the system unfortunately, among the police and social services. At the start, a lot of them do NOT believe these young people to be minors and there’s a real culture of disbelief among the institutions like the police and social services. There is a real lack of priority and urgency – you wouldn’t see that were it another child!”

Social worker at a reception centre, UK

“When confronted with an increasing number of disappearances of unaccompanied children, we initiated a Memorandum of Understanding with all the relevant actors in the field: the police, the magistrate, the tutors, the immigration office and the shelters. It doesn’t work miracles, but it allows the different actors to understand each other’s work, to see which information is crucial for the partners and to speed up the exchange of information. It’s our duty to continue to break through the indifference towards this group of children.”

Child Focus, running the hotline for missing children in Belgium





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Foreword

On 31 January 2016, Europol reported that 10,000 unaccompanied children are unaccounted for after arriving in Europe, with many feared to be exploited and abused for sexual or labour purposes.

While systematic and comprehensive data on the disappearance of unaccompanied children in Europe is unavailable to date, it is clear that the rate of children that go missing from care facilities is staggering – and continues to increase in the recent refugee crisis.

In 2015, the Swedish coastal town of Trelleborg reported that 1000 out of the 1900 who had arrived in the town had gone missing within the span of a month. The Italian Ministry of Welfare declared that 62% of the children that had arrived between January and May 2015 were unaccounted for. In January 2016, the Federal Criminal Police (BKA) reported that 4749 unaccompanied child and adolescent refugees are considered to be missing, of which 431 were younger than 13-years-old.

Each and every one of these children is a child with hopes, dreams and fears, who are entitled to the same human rights as the rest of us. The vast majority have arrived in Europe following long and difficult journeys over land and sea, having left their home because of conflict, war or poverty. Some have been separated from their families during the journey. Some others have been sent to Europe by their parents, who stay behind hoping their child will find a better future in Europe.

Once in Europe, some children go missing from care facilities with a specific migration plan in mind, often linked to a wish to be reunited with family members in other Member States. Many run away because of the fear of being sent back to the situation they tried to escape from, or to avoid an unwanted Dublin transfer. Others are groomed by traffickers and end up being exploited in prostitution, forced labour or begging.

Irrespective of the reason why they go missing, many of them slip through the net of child protection systems in place that increases the risk of children becoming victims of violations of their basic human rights.

Protecting these children is a shared responsibility of all EU Member States, at the level of law enforcement authorities, guardians, reception centres, hotline professionals and more. Too often failing cooperation and coordination, nationally and transnationally, between these stakeholders becomes an obstacle to achieving what we ultimately all aim to do: bringing these children to safety and protecting them from harm.

The SUMMIT project coordinated by Missing Children Europe in partnership with the University of Portsmouth (UK), NIDOS (NL), Defence for children-ECPAT (NL), TUSLA (IR), KMOP (EL) and Child Circle (BE), and with the support of the European Commission, aims to contribute to improving effective interagency cooperation in preventing and responding to the disappearance of unaccompanied children. The current report provides for a first deliverable in the project: the analysis and findings of interviews conducted with grassroots practitioners in 7 EU Member States. These findings highlight a number of challenges encountered by professionals working for the protection of unaccompanied children, but also several good practices adopted in the countries studied, that could serve as a model or inspiration for colleagues in other countries. The next step will consist of the development of training tools, as well as the organisation of a training seminar due to take place in April 2016.

It is clear that the SUMMIT project alone will not resolve the problem, and that efforts will have to continue to live up to the rights of children arriving on our shores. More efforts will be needed to improve the coordination at national and transnational level. In doing so, we must make the best use of existing tools, for example the network of hotlines for missing children,





operated through the 116 000 number and international databases for sharing information on missing cases. We should also foster the creation of a climate of efficient cooperation, in which the needs and rights of each and every individual child guides us in finding answers to the many challenges ahead.

On behalf of Missing Children Europe, I wish to thank all the contributors of this publication, in particular the co-author Dr. Karen Shalev Greene (Director of the Centre for the Study of Missing Persons at the University of Portsmouth), Rebecca O'Donnell (Director at Child Circle), Jan Murk (Head Reception Bureau, Projects and International Affairs at Nidos), Martine Goeman (Program Manager Children's Rights and Migration at Defence for Children – ECPAT NL), Vassia Karkantzou (Head of Programme Operations at KMOP) and Thomas Dunning (Principal Social Worker at TUSLA).

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Executive summary



Unaccompanied children in Europe

An unprecedented number of migrant children arrived in Europe unaccompanied in 2014. While official statistics related to 2015 have not yet been published, it is certain that this number increased drastically. In addition, many organisations have reported that the chaotic situation at the EU-Balkans' border caused a high number of children to be separated from their families.

Research reveals that up to 50% of the unaccompanied children accommodated go missing from certain reception facility in some countries in the European Union, and in many cases, information about the child's whereabouts remain unknown¹. Data collected from hotlines for missing children, which operate in 29 countries through the 116 000 telephone number, reveals that unaccompanied migrant children go missing from age 8 up to 17 years².

Unaccompanied children who go missing may be children who have already applied for asylum or are wanting to apply for asylum in another EU Member State where they have family or where they believe that they could have a better future. Some of them may have not applied for protection, either because they lack information, or they are discouraged by the perceived length and complexity of the

procedure, or they are aware of having small or no chances to apply successfully. In some cases, children may decide to pursue their own migration plan outside regular procedures available, relying on help and information collected from peers, family members or smugglers. Some children are detached from the protection system by criminal networks looking to exploit them for profit. As reported by Europol recently³, there is a tremendous amount of crossover between those smuggling refugees across borders and gangs ensnaring people for exploitation in the sex trade or as forced labor. Victims for exploitation are "especially those of a young age, young women, the unaccompanied".

Missing unaccompanied children are first of all missing children, entitled to the same protection as any other child. All actions and laws which apply to missing children in general equally apply to unaccompanied children. However, despite the enormous risks to which unaccompanied migrant children are exposed, their disappearance is usually underreported. For many of these children, the journey into exploitation and suffering does not end once they arrive on EU shores.

¹ See SUMMIT Study, "The issue of missing unaccompanied children", ch.1.1.

² For more information see [Missing Children Europe's website](#).

³ Unaccompanied young refugees in Europe 'at risk from criminal gangs'. (The Guardian, Nov.2015)



The SUMMIT project

The project Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation (SUMMIT), launched in October 2014, is co-funded by the EU under the Pilot Project “Analysis of reception, protection and integration policies for unaccompanied minors in the EU”. It was implemented through a partnership cooperation of six organisations, including Missing Children Europe (BE), NIDOS (NL), Defence for children-ECPAT (NL), KMOP (EL) and Child Circle (BE) and TUSLA, the Irish Child and Family Agency, and the University of Portsmouth (UK). The partnership was supported by a group of organisations running the hotline for missing children, operated through the number 116 000, in seven Member States, namely Telefono Azzurro (IT), Child Focus (BE), Missing People (UK), Consortium “Hope for Children” UNCRC Policy Centre (CY), Fundacion Anar (ES) and The Smile of the Child (EL).

The objective of the project is to reduce the numbers of unaccompanied children who go missing. “To this end, this project addresses how the issue of the disappearance of an unaccompanied child is tackled in different Member States⁴ and promotes successful strategies and behaviours related to the prevention and response to disappearances.” Please keep the footnote explaining which are the member states. The project specifically looked to combine the experience of hotlines who work with missing children in general and actors who work on the issues of unaccompanied migrant children, and from that combination examine how to cooperate better on this issue and on what issues in particular.

⁴ Namely Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.



The SUMMIT study

This research project builds on the results of recent EU co-funded projects, existing research and available good practice related to unaccompanied children and aims to deepen the discussion regarding the disappearances of unaccompanied children. Partners of this project have been involved because of their role as coordinators or partners in those previous activities.

The aim of this research is to identify good practices and key challenges in inter-agency cooperation in the prevention of, and response to, vulnerable unaccompanied children who go missing from reception centres and other types of care. Several actors are involved in the situation of unaccompanied children and missing children, but this research investigates specifically the cooperation between members of three stakeholders' groups: law enforcement agencies, carers (guardians, social services and reception centre workers) and hotlines for missing children. Four areas of action were explored, namely:

- > Prevention of disappearances
- > Response to disappearances
- > After care of an unaccompanied child who returned or was found after disappearing
- > Training

Seven key countries took part in the study: Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Data was collected using 41 online surveys and 17 phone/face-to-face interviews during February-March 2015.

Despite the high number of disappearances, it was very difficult to identify professionals willing to share their experience and knowledge in the seven countries studied, especially among law enforcement⁵. However, a substantial amount of content was collected and many issues were consistently identified by participants from different countries.

Almost all responding reception centres operators, guardians and social services with experience in working with unaccompanied children have experienced the disappearance of a child under their care. This suggests that the phenomenon in the seven countries studied is very common and supports previous research on the matter. According to the experience of the participants in this study, the whereabouts of the missing unaccompanied children remain unknown in the majority of cases.

⁵ It is important to highlight that interviews and surveys were conducted during the first quarter of 2015, before the influx of very high numbers that characterised the rest of the year.



Key findings in relation to preventing an unaccompanied child from going missing

Collection of identifying information

Identifying information may include the name of the child, presumed age, description of the child including distinguishing features, photograph, biometrical information such as fingerprints, as well as information about the origin and nationality of the child. Other information about the child can be very helpful in the event that they disappear, including family members and their location, or special needs of the child. It is also useful to have preliminary information on the assessment of particular risks to the child, for example if the child was found in the hands of smugglers.

The identification of unaccompanied children can be quite challenging. Children don't often carry identity papers, and many countries do not allow fingerprinting if the unaccompanied child is younger than 14 years old. Therefore, the collection of detailed and exhaustive information on a child (including pictures) proves to be essential to ensure a proper follow up in case of disappearance. It is important to report that the follow up on a case of a missing unaccompanied child proved to be easier when law enforcement agencies and child protection authorities were able to refer to biometrical information to identify the child.

Most successful practices are those which take time constraints into consideration. As many children tend to go missing within a few hours from their detection or placement in a care centre, it is important to collect identifying

information and assess special needs as the child comes in. Identifying and background information could be gathered promptly in known border points, such as airports and ports, allowing the unaccompanied child to be immediately referred to appropriate child protection services who gather fuller information. The documentation of needs of unaccompanied children would also facilitate the development of an appropriate care plan. Quick and efficient collection of information is proven to benefit greatly from the use of standard forms, easily shareable with concerned services, and simplified administrative procedures.

It has been noticed that the practice of creating personal file (paper but preferably digital, for sharing purposes), for example through standard forms to be filled in with the information provided by the child in one or several sessions, allows easiest storage and retrieval of information collected. This practice has also demonstrated to ease the sharing of information between authorities in cases of disappearance. Another advantage of this practice is an easier update of the file with new information.

Easier centralised systems to register information that would help identify or find the unaccompanied child would simplify cooperation between authorities in charge of the protection and/or the asylum application of the child. Indeed they would also greatly contribute to ensure an efficient continuation of the protection of a previously missing child, in national and international cases.



Gathering information proved to be more efficient if conducted by trained personnel timely appointed, for example guardians.

Assessing likelihood of unaccompanied child to go missing

Assessing if the child will go missing has proven to be useful in identifying immediate reception and protection needs, also in terms of supervision. While the majority of survey participants have declared that an assessment is carried out, interviewed professionals revealed that this assessment may be quite brief. The assessment could benefit from the development of a standardised list of identifying and background information that needs to be gathered about unaccompanied children, and standardised criteria and indicators of the likelihood of them going missing.

Many professionals in the care of unaccompanied children have reported that unaccompanied children from some countries will go missing with more probability than others. The nationality of the child could be considered an indicator of the risk that the child will go missing. It could also indicate the existence of trafficking rings. It is interesting to notice that these trends reportedly change, depending on the Member State.

As assessment of the risk that the child could become a victim of trafficking or being re-trafficked is essential in terms of prevention of disappearance. Only following this assessment authorities would be able to take the necessary measures to detach the child from trafficking rings and proceed with the referral to specific services. To this end, training the personnel in contact with the child, especially during the first moments, in identifying indicators of trafficking could be beneficial.

Some participants expressed the need to have

access to national guidance and specific tools for assessing risk indicators, in order to improve the risk assessment process and standardise it, on a national level.

Interestingly, Interpol and border authorities are not considered, by those who participated in the study, a relevant stakeholder to involve when assessing the risk that an unaccompanied child will go missing, although many cases of disappearances may be linked with known migration patterns or international organised crime. 116 000 hotlines are also not involved in this assessment, despite the cross border nature of many of these cases.

Inform unaccompanied child about their rights, regulations and practices

The importance of providing complete and understandable information on procedures and services available to the unaccompanied child facilitates awareness and clarity. Furthermore, many participants reported that it contributes to building a relationship of trust between the professional and the child against the commonly reported widespread suspicion and scepticism that these children have against authorities. According to interviewed professionals, the creation of a relationship of trust is the most efficient measure to prevent the disappearance of the child where procedures are often perceived as lengthy and complicated. To this end, routinely engaging with the child and providing updates about the process they are or will be subjected to and what it is likely to involve are also considered effective.

The involvement of mediators with a similar cultural background, speaking the language of the child, have proven to simplify communication and foster understanding and trust in the care provided. Child friendly communication, such as leaflets and videos, have also demonstrated effectiveness.



Interviewed professionals in care services underlined the importance to explain in detail what risks children could encounter if absconding as well as the consequences that this would have on the ongoing administrative procedures and for their safety.

Collaboration with other agencies in prevention activities

Responses received on the efficiency of inter-service cooperation in terms of prevention suggest that good outcomes depend greatly on the people involved, their knowledge and motivation to be involved in preventative activities. However there is a frequent lack of formal procedures of cooperation and strategic planning of such activities.

One of the main obstacles to cooperation identified by interviewees is the lack of national databases and reference systems to store all the information collected on the child. Collecting all information in one place, with due regard for confidentiality of certain information and data protection, would simplify access to information in case of need, not only in case of disappearance but also when deciding on the care approach best for the specific child, as information may be scattered as it is collected by different services at different times.

The creation of safety/care plans, triggered by a thorough assessment of the risk that the child will go missing and elaborated with other agencies, was found a very successful practice in several countries. These plans are developed by reception centres or foster families, together with guardians (or similarly qualified professionals) and can involve NGO's experts in certain issues, for example trafficking in human beings, to better tackle a certain situation.

Care professionals and 116 000 hotlines recognise a key role that law enforcement

agencies play in the prevention of disappearances which, often law enforcement agencies seem not to be aware of as demonstrated by the few responses collected on this by interviewed police officers. Professionals express that they value greatly receiving all information on migration paths, national and international patterns of trafficking and known criminal activity that could have an impact on the safety of the child, as this could be key to take the best supervision and reception for the child. According to the answers collected, cooperation in this field seem to be absent.



Key findings in relation to response to the disappearance of unaccompanied children

Responsibility of a missing unaccompanied child

The study shows that the response to the disappearance of an unaccompanied child and actions to be undertaken when the disappearance of a child is detected can be very confused where the ownership of the case is unclear. Instead, where the case would be 'owned' by a specific agency and therefore, it would be clear which authority is ultimately responsible for a missing unaccompanied child, procedures would be faster and therefore, more efficient in child protection terms. Several participants highlighted that their work will benefit from a clear and well-understood division of tasks between authorities. Consistency of service would be improved and lack of action by different agencies would be reduced. In other words, to ensure appropriate protection of the child it is necessary for professionals to know who does what and this is often not the reality.

In some cases, hotlines for missing children have proved to be a key player in bringing together all stakeholders that could have a role in providing the best response to a disappearance of an unaccompanied child. These NGOs are used to cooperating with law enforcement agencies and other actors (e.g. magistrates, social services), often on the basis of a memorandum of understanding or an operational protocol. In the countries where the hotline triggered improved dialogue and cooperation in cases of disappearances of migrant

children, the process often led to the development of protocols defining clearly each one's tasks and responsibilities.

Professionals working on cases of missing children, especially when belonging to a law enforcement agency, would indeed benefit from receiving specific training in relation to unaccompanied children, the issue of "missing" and what the general procedures are in response to the disappearances of children in the country where they work. This would help reduce bias against them and improve staff's knowledge and skills to react to the disappearance of unaccompanied children.

Reporting of a missing unaccompanied child

Quick reporting of missing unaccompanied child cases to the police is reported as quite challenging. Some among the participants flagged that lengthy reporting procedures and lack of human resources in reception centres may discourage an operator from leaving the centre to report the disappearance of the child, especially when it is perceived that the police do not provide appropriate follow up to the case. The possibility to report the disappearance without physically leaving the centre (by phone or email) seems to facilitate a swift communication of the disappearance to the police. A centralised system of the collection and administration of all information related to the unaccompanied child, mentioned in the section related to prevention (e.g. regarding



identity, family inside and outside Europe, background, being a victim of trafficking) may therefore allow a faster reporting and more efficient decision making process on the most appropriate response to the disappearance of the child.

When funding for a reception centre is linked to the number of children hosted there, the report of a disappearance may be delayed to not lose important resources. This suggests that estimation of appropriate funding for a centre should be based on other criteria.

Activities when an unaccompanied child goes missing

First of all, it is important to note that some of the interviewed professionals from law enforcement agencies and care services referred to missing unaccompanied children as “runaways”. It is important not to assume automatically that every missing unaccompanied child left the reception centre or the foster family out of his or her own free will. It is necessary to assess the possibility that the child may be a victim of trafficking, labour or sexual exploitation and other crimes. Delayed or an absence of response to a disappearance of an unaccompanied child should never be justified, not even in those cases when the child left the centre voluntarily. Full protection against all risks that may lead to or result from being missing should be granted to every missing child, irrespective of the reason behind the disappearance. This reveals once again the importance of providing appropriate training on missing children to law enforcement and care professionals.

Responses and approaches to disappearances differ substantially not only from country to country, but also among interviewees from the same country. In none of the countries studied we have encountered full satisfaction with the response given to the disappearance of an

unaccompanied child. Instead, we have documented frustration during every interview conducted. Lack of consistency at national level suggests once again that the type of response depends on the motivation and skills of the people involved in the case and the procedures for efficient cooperation are generally lacking.

According to the vast majority of care professionals interviewed and hotlines for missing children involved, the disappearance of an unaccompanied child is not prioritised and is not given the same urgency and care that would be provided for citizens.

Search activities of a missing unaccompanied child

While search activities seem to be conducted in most cases in the countries studied, concerns have been raised about what “search activity” means. Law enforcement officers interviewed expressed frustration in relation to the limited amount of information available on the missing child, which would be the reason for a limited follow up of the case. Although many children disappear within a very limited time, jeopardising the possibility of collecting enough relevant information, many interviewed guardians and care centres’ operators complain that follow up is limited even when elements for further investigation are available.

Once again, the centralised administration of information relating to unaccompanied children could enhance the quality of the investigation, reducing the time needed to get access to information and ensuring that every element is available in one place. To this end, standardised forms to be used to collect information may be developed with the police, who could contribute by highlighting what would be useful to know in case a child goes missing.



Publicity appeals

Publicity of cases of missing unaccompanied children is not done frequently and in some cases it is even forbidden. As the children are exposed to great risks to their security, it is important that all decisions regarding the use of their image is carefully considered with the police and the competent magistrate.

Cooperation with other agencies in response to a missing unaccompanied child

It is in the nature of hotlines for missing children to build bridges between actors working on missing children and it has been demonstrated by this study that they could play an important role in triggering discussions on how responses could be improved when the missing child is an unaccompanied migrant.

General progress in the cooperation was reported in those countries where stakeholders developed a multi-agency protocol of cooperation contemplating the response to disappearances of unaccompanied children. Reportedly, multi-agency protocols have proven very useful to clarify who are the actors involved and what are the related competences. Protocols have also been an efficient tool to improve systems for information sharing between agencies and for the development of a specific care plan and safeguarding actions. Periodical review of the cooperation agreement is recommended to relaunch discussions and fine-tune procedures for cooperation.

In the United Kingdom, the creation of multi-agency hubs including police, children's services and anti-trafficking experts to support the work of grassroots professionals have proven to improve substantially cooperation between services, especially in terms of information sharing, data collection and research. These hubs also provide support to operations when

required and ensure coordination among programmes and initiatives. These hubs seem to be a model that could be easily exported in other countries and adapted to national situations.

Cross border cooperation between care institutions, law enforcement agencies and networks for missing children seems to be almost non-existent when it comes to responding to disappearances of unaccompanied minors. Reportedly, investigations are put on hold when the child is believed to have crossed a national border. If the child is believed to be in a certain country in Europe, reception centres operators and guardians often follow up on the disappearance independently from the police, because of concern for the safety of the child. They often use social media like Facebook, or they seek information from friends and acquaintances of the child. This search sometimes proves to be successful, as it enables care providers to find the whereabouts of the child and make sure that they are safe. This pattern is successful especially when children are willing to be reunited with family in other countries. However, many carers expressed the need to develop tools for quick cross border exchange of information on a missing unaccompanied child, for example an international database, who are available and accessible to child protection authorities.

The network of hotlines for missing children are not often involved in search activities in cross border cases of disappearances of migrant children, despite the good results that the involvement of this network demonstrates in other investigations and the proved efficiency of its internal cooperation procedures. The involvement of hotlines would have an added value, especially in countries where strong guardianship systems are not in place, due to the experience in dealing with cases of missing children.



Key findings in relation to aftercare

Circumstances of being found

Participants confirm once again that in many cases the whereabouts of the majority of unaccompanied children who went missing remain unknown.

When children move from one country to another, because they believe the chance to be granted international protection would be higher or the care system would be better, they may be actively avoiding being identified and therefore, they may provide a fake identity to avoid transfer back. As biometrical information is not often available, cross checking profiles is quite difficult.

Children may try to get in touch with those professionals or peers that have gained their trust. To this end, they may use phone or internet (for example, email and social media). The contact established with the child is not often reported to the authorities for a number of reasons, for example the frustration for the lack of follow up on the missing case or the intention to support the migration plan of the child. This does not appear to be the case if the child is suspected to be in danger. However, in some cases the care giver may try to get in touch with personal connections in the country where the child is suspected to be. This seems to suggest a lack of trust in a follow up from the authorities in charge.

Carers often complain about the difficulty in obtaining information from law enforcement agencies on the outcome of the investigation on the disappearance, whether the child was found or not. Lack of information sharing on this matter may jeopardise the general cooperation between law enforcement agencies and care professionals.

Needs of unaccompanied children when they are found

Systematic assessment of the needs of a previously missing unaccompanied child is rarely conducted and we have not been able to identify the existence of structured official procedures in the countries that we studied. However, many carers have underlined that the needs of unaccompanied children need to be thoroughly analysed and considered when deciding on a care plan for the child when detected or found. To this end, an important aspect to take into account is if the chance that the child will go missing again are reported as quite high. Staff responsible for the care of the unaccompanied child should be trained and aware of the needs of unaccompanied children when they are found. Multi-agency work proved to be an efficient standard practice in these cases.

It is important to highlight that unaccompanied children found in specific contexts that suggest that they have been engaged in criminal activity, are not always considered victims. It is important to make sure that they are provided with care assessment and support plans rather than treated as criminals who are dealt with by the criminal justice system.

Interviews when an unaccompanied child is found

The practice of conducting an attentive interview with the unaccompanied child after his detection or return from going missing is considered successful for the identification of the needs of the child and the development of a care plan. Personnel must be trained for this purpose. In order to allow for the best cooperation between services, it is suggested by



several participants that information gathered from interviews with unaccompanied children should be recorded and stored in one database that is shared by all agencies working with unaccompanied children. The database should be confidential and password protected, with access to only those who work with unaccompanied children. Consistently holding interviews should be a priority.

Interpol and border authorities may find some information gathered from interviews an important source of intelligence, especially when the child has been a victim of criminal organisations. Therefore, it is important that law enforcement agencies are informed of any element that could be relevant for their work, without neglecting the need to respect confidentiality.



Study



1 Unaccompanied children in Europe

An unaccompanied child is a non-EU national or stateless person below the age of 18 who arrives on the territory of the European Union unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him/her and for as long as s/he is not effectively taken into the care of such a person, including a minor who is left unaccompanied as s/he has entered the territory of the EU States (Directive 2011/95/EU).

Every year, thousands of children arrive in the EU unaccompanied to: escape from wars and conflicts, poverty, natural catastrophes, discrimination or persecution; in the expectation of a better life or in order to access education and welfare, including to receive medical attention; to join family members; or, as victims of human trafficking destined for exploitation such as sexual exploitation and forced labour or services.

Eurostat reported that in 2014, 23,075 asylum applications were submitted by unaccompanied minors in the EU. 2,240 of the applicants were less than 14 years old. Both numbers are almost double compared to the previous year. It is important to add that many other unaccompanied children do not apply for asylum. In 2013, only 13 Member States were able to provide details on the number of recognised unaccompanied children not applying for asylum, accounting for a total of 12,465⁶. Inconsistent data management, especially

regarding the latter group, means that we continue to remain ill-informed of the real numbers of unaccompanied children in the EU.

Eurostat data on how many unaccompanied children applied for asylum in 2015 is not yet available however, we can be certain that the number of unaccompanied children arriving in the EU has increased. In the first nine months of 2015, 10,000 unaccompanied or separated children arrived in Italy and Malta alone. From January to October 2015, more unaccompanied children had sought asylum in Sweden than in the entire EU in 2014, with 23,300 claims (9,300 in October alone)⁷. Between 19 June and late November 2015, the Republic of Macedonia registered over 15,000 unaccompanied children crossing the border with Greece⁸. In addition, it has been reported by several organisations that the number of children separated from their families at the EU-Balkans' borders increased dramatically.

Upon arrival, children should be placed in observation, care or reception centres. Where a guardianship system is in place, they are assigned guardians before steps are taken to determine where they are placed on a more permanent basis. During this period and later, many of these children go missing.

⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, 5th Annual Report on Immigration and Asylum (2013) (COM(2014) 288 final). (European Commission, 2013)

⁷ Monthly Statistics: Asylum applications (Swedish Migration Agency, 2015)

⁸ Data Brief: Migration of Children to Europe (IOM and UNICEF, Nov. 2015)



1.1 The challenge of missing unaccompanied children

The disappearance of unaccompanied children is a global phenomenon and research from a range of countries has focused on this issue and the psychological impact on the children involved. Sourander (1997) found that these children have experienced a number of losses, separations, persecution and threats. Even when beginning their journeys with parents or siblings, many children are in fact intentionally separated from family members and taken by child traffickers or smugglers. When they arrive or are encountered by authorities in a country, they may be placed in care but may subsequently disappear. The SUMMIT Project primarily addresses these cases of disappearances, namely, unaccompanied migrant children who disappear from State care.

While the full extent of the disappearance of unaccompanied children remains unknown due to underreporting and incoherent data management, efforts have been undertaken to understand the extent of the issue.

- › In Belgium, research undertaken by Child Focus in 2005 recorded that unaccompanied children seeking asylum disappear in approximately 25% of the cases within the first 48 hours upon arrival.⁹ Child Focus reports that the number of missing unaccompanied children is lower nowadays, but that there is much less information about the percentage of non-asylum seeking unaccompanied children going missing.
 - › In the UK, the British Asylum Screening Unit reported that 60% of the unaccompanied minors accommodated in UK social care centres go missing and are not found again.¹⁰
 - › In 2010, Terres des Hommes calculated that up to half of unaccompanied children vanish each year from reception centres in Belgium, France, Spain and Switzerland, mainly in the first 48 hours after their admission to the centres.¹¹
 - › In Sweden, more than 800 children have disappeared in the last five years. In 2014, Sweridge Radio reported 374 unaccompanied children went missing and only 59 have been tracked down.¹² The situation seems even more worrying in 2015 when the coastal town of Trelleborg reported that 1,000 children from the 1,900 unaccompanied children who arrived in September had disappeared.¹³
 - › In Italy, the CONNECT project reported that, in 2013, 24% of registered unaccompanied children went missing from reception centres and that many more go missing before registration. The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that in 2014, 3,707 unaccompanied children of the 14,243 who were registered after arriving via boat went missing from reception centres.¹⁴ The Ministry of Welfare reported that in 2015, 62% of all unaccompanied children who had arrived between January and May went missing.¹⁵
 - › In Germany, on January 1 2016, the Federal Criminal Police (BKA) said that 4749 unaccompanied children are considered to be missing. 431 among them are younger than 13-years-old, 4,287 between 14 and 17-years-old and 31 aged 18. On July 1, 2015 the number of missing unaccompanied refugees was 1,637.
 - › Data collected from hotlines for missing children which operate in 29 countries through the 116 000 telephone number reveals that approximately 1% of all calls made to 116 000 hotlines relate to missing unaccompanied children and that unaccompanied children go missing from age 8 up to 17 years.¹⁶
- These vulnerable children in their search for a better life often end up in even worse situations than those they left behind, falling victim to kidnapping, trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced marriage and economic exploitation, including



the forced donation of organs, forced drug smuggling and begging. A worrying number of these children disappear.

As a result, it is well documented by research in Sweden, Finland and Belgium that unaccompanied children have high levels of psychiatric disorders and are overrepresented in inpatient psychiatric care¹⁷. It was also argued that this 'psychological' perspective shows the necessity for a strongly elaborated reception and care system for these children, in order to meet their specific situation and needs¹⁸.

The phenomenon of unaccompanied children have received increasing attention at European level. EU efforts have included the development of a special action plan, the Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors, adopted in 2010 and which expired in 2014,¹⁹ addressing the need to prevent unsafe migration, protect migrants and find durable solutions. The Agenda on Migration adopted in May 2015 announced the decision of the European Commission to develop a comprehensive strategy to cover missing and unaccompanied children, as a follow up to the expired plan. The format of this strategy was not decided at the time this report was printed, but an exchange of views between the Commission and relevant organisations has been initiated.

Despite the steps undertaken, many challenges remain in developing effective and coordinated responses to the specific matter of the disappearance of these children. A recent study by the European Commission on data on missing children²⁰ for instance illustrated that:

- › In Belgium, the disappearance from the "observation and research centre" is only reported to the police when it is considered alarming;
- › In Denmark, missing migrant children have to be reported immediately if they are younger than 15 years, while for those aged above

15 a 24hour intervention threshold is set;

- › Finland also sets a 24hour waiting period before declaring a child missing, while;
- › Hungary makes a distinction between children that do and do not seek asylum. It is noted that, whilst asylum seeking children rarely go missing, non-asylum seeking children often disappear within the first 24-48 hours, so they are not usually recorded until after this time has elapsed.
- › In Slovenia the police will work with the asylum home to establish the circumstances of any unaccompanied migrant children who have disappeared. However, if the child has not returned in three days, their application for asylum is considered as 'withdrawn'. No further investigative action is taken in this situation.
- › Only a minority of countries report to have legal or procedural regulations on missing migrant children. Those are Austria, Finland, Ireland and Romania.



⁹ “Studie over het profiel en het traject van nietbegeleide minderjarige asielzoekers in ons land”. (Child Focus, 2005)

¹⁰ Unaccompanied Minors in the Migration Process. (Frontex, 2010)

¹¹ Disappearing, departing, running away A surfeit of children in Europe? (Terre des Hommes, 2010)

¹² Hundreds of refugee youths disappear every year. (Radio Sweden, Feb. 2015)

¹³ Swedish town reports 1,000 missing children. (The Local, Oct 2015)

¹⁴ Migranti, l’allarme di Alfano: “3707 minori scomparsi dai centri di accoglienza”. (La Stampa, Jan. 2015)

¹⁵ Minori migranti: oltre 5.100 irreperibili su 8.200 arrivati, Migrants Online. (Fondazione Migrantes, June 2015)

¹⁶ Missing Children Facts and Figures 2014. (Missing Children Europe, 2015)

¹⁷ Overrepresentation of unaccompanied refugee minors in inpatient psychiatric care. (Ramel, Taljemark, Lindgren, Johansson, 2015)

¹⁸ Unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents: The glaring contrast between a legal and a psychological perspective. (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008)

¹⁹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010 - 2014). (European Commission, 2015)

²⁰ Missing children in the European Union - Mapping, data collection and statistics. (European Commission, 2013)



1.2 Recent EU co-funded projects touching the issue of missing unaccompanied children

This research builds on the results of recent EU co-funded projects, existing research and available good practices related to unaccompanied children and aims to extend the discussion regarding the disappearances of unaccompanied children. Partners of this project have been involved because of their role as coordinators or partners in those previous activities.

- In 2014, the CONNECT project²¹, coordinated by Save the Children Sweden, explored inter alia which actors are involved in reporting and responding to disappearances of unaccompanied children, including guardians, lawyers, reception centre employees and police, and how and to what extent they cooperate. The consequences of disappearances, including how disappearances affect the management of a child's case, were also considered and the prevention of disappearances was also explored. Through mapping of practices in Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom, the findings highlighted a diversity of practices across EU on some complex and sensitive issues, but also several common difficulties. These include the need to reinforce actors' understanding of the situation of these children through training and the need to equip actors better to work collectively through establishing clear roles, mandates and protocols/routines. Some national practices on inter-agency cooperation might be further developed and replicated in other countries, including better screening and responses to children at risk. Preventing disappearances remains an important but sensitive objective for actors.
- In 2015, DUBLIN SUPPORT FOR GUARDIANS²², coordinated by Nidos, elaborated tools to offer practical assistance to guardians in cases when an unaccompanied child is confronted with the DUBLIN III Regulation. The project resulted in an improvement of the service of guardians in Dublin procedures in the EU especially in terms of family reunification.
- In 2014, VIGILA ET PROTEGE²³, coordinated by the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs, provided recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of search and protection of unaccompanied children through the SIS II. Among its recommendations, the project provided suggestions on how to enhance cooperation between European SIRENE units and collected good practice on entering missing unaccompanied children in the Schengen Information System.
- Between 2010 and 2014, CLOSING A PROTECTION GAP²⁴ and CLOSING A PROTECTION GAP 2.0²⁵, coordinated by Defence for Children International – the Netherlands, aimed at improving the situation and development opportunities for separated children by means of developing core standards with a focus on the qualifications of guardians, based on the views of separated children in relation to their rights according to the CRC and EU directives. After the development of the core standards, the project looked at how they can be applied in practice and how to work towards policy and legislative initiatives at national and European level in order for all separated children in the EU to get the protection they are entitled to.
- In 2012, IMPACT - Improving & Monitoring Protection Systems Against Child Trafficking and Exploitation²⁶, a study funded by the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme, DG Home, European



Commission, examined monitoring and protection systems against child trafficking and exploitation in Cyprus, Italy, Greece and Portugal. The project found that based on available evidence, children are better protected from trafficking and exploitation when their rights to a safe and healthy development are safeguarded in practice, in line with international standards.

· THE MARIO PROJECT²⁷, coordinated by Terre des Hommes, aiming to improve the level of protection of Central and South East European migrant children who are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and/or trafficking. The project seeks – through transnational research, advocacy, trainings and direct support to professionals and empowerment of at-risk migrant children – to find multilateral solutions to the problems that children face prior, during or after migration and that require coordinated protection schemes for individual children. The Mario project, implemented in 16 countries in Central and South Eastern Europe (EU countries and non-EU countries) fosters inter-institutional and transnational collaboration between countries (of origin and destination) while promoting evidence-based and European solutions to the unsafe migration of children.

· DURABLE SOLUTION FOR SEPARATED CHILDREN IN EUROPE²⁸, coordinated by the Irish Refugee Council, focuses on the methodology behind arriving at the durable solution for the child. The results of the project demonstrate the importance that European Member States have adequate procedures in place to develop a care plan that incorporates a durable solution. This care plan should take into account the views of the child and assess any risk factors at the outset and continually review this plan as the child matures and their circumstances change.

· GATE29 aims to increase the capacity of

the guardianship systems in Italy, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands, to protect separated children against trafficking and exploitation. While the initiative is addressed to guardians as privileged interlocutors of separated children, it adopts an “holistic” approach, considering the functioning of the guardianship system as a whole (e.g. legislative framework and its implementation, administrative procedures, professionals involved, networking between actors at local and national levels, existence and quality of training, financial resources available) as the important container/context within which guardians’ potentials can be valued and their roles strengthened.

· PROTECTION FIRST³⁰, coordinated by Save the Children Italy, aiming to improve knowledge on child trafficking and to prevent child trafficking and protect child victims and children at risk of trafficking and any form of exploitation, including the less known ones (e.g. involvement in criminal activities) through research, the use of identification tools and awareness raising.



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- ²¹ <http://www.connectproject.eu/>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²² <http://engi.eu/projects/dublin-support-for-guardians/>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²³ <http://cesie.org/en/inclusione-integrazione/vet-handbook/>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²⁴ <http://www.corestandardsforguardians.com/>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²⁵ <http://www.scepnetwork.org/p/1/94/guardianship>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²⁶ <http://www.impact-eu.org/>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²⁷ www.marioproject.org, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²⁸ <http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/children-and-young-people/durable-solutions-for-separated-children-in-europe>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ²⁹ <http://www.gate-eu.org>, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.
- ³⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/eu-projects/protection-first-early-identification-protection-and-assistance-child-victims-and-risk_en, Web. 7 Jan. 2016.



2 The SUMMIT approach and methodology

2.1 The SUMMIT Project

The project Safeguarding Unaccompanied Migrant Minors from going Missing by Identifying Best Practices and Training Actors on Interagency Cooperation (SUMMIT), launched in October 2014, is co-funded by the EU under the Pilot Project “Analysis of reception, protection and integration policies for unaccompanied minors in the EU”.

The general objective of this project is to reduce the numbers of unaccompanied children who go missing. To this end, this project addresses how the issue of the disappearance of an unaccompanied child is tackled in different Member States and promotes successful strategies and behaviours related to the prevention and response to disappearances. The project also touches on the challenges related to the transnational cooperation in case of disappearance of unaccompanied children, however the complexity of the matter would require a dedicated research.

The specific objectives of the project are three-fold:

1. To identify good practice in the prevention of, and response to, vulnerable unaccompanied children going missing from reception centres (taking into consideration reception, risk assessment, counselling and cooperation between actors)
2. To develop guidance for improved inter-agency cooperation in preventing and responding to the issue of missing unaccompanied children
3. To facilitate implementation of the guidance through joined seminars involving all relevant actors/stakeholders

These objectives were pursued by a task force of organisations, the composition of which took into account the set of different skills and competencies needed for the expected outcomes and deliverables, including the grassroots expertise of professionals delivering services in the field of guardianship services and the reception of unaccompanied children. The composition of the partnership also reflected the recent developments and projects carried out relating to guardianship, reception centres and unaccompanied children, in an effort to build upon and not duplicate work already carried out in this area. Within the task force, a steering group brought into focus the various different angles of the issue: ‘missing’, child protection, guardianship, migration and asylum, law enforcement, child reception, operational standards etc. Members of the steering group are Missing Children Europe, the coordinator of the project, the University of Portsmouth (UK), NIDOS (NL), Defence for children-ECPAT (NL), the Child and Family Agency – TUSLA (IE), KMOP (EL) and Child Circle. The role of the steering group was to actively participate in the development of the deliverables, bringing their experience in previously EU co-funded projects and their expertise on the content matter.

Other organisations that are members of the task force are associate partners and are organisations running the hotlines for missing children, rolled out through the number 116 000, in the countries studied in this research project. They play a key role in the project, contributing with their experience and expertise in managing cases of missing children. They are also in charge of the dissemination for their respective countries. Associate partners of SUMMIT are



Telefono Azzurro (IT), Child Focus (BE), Missing People (UK), Consortium “Hope for Children” UNCRC Policy Centre (CY), Fundacion Anar (ES) and The Smile of the Child (EL).

In addition to the objectives of this research project, the SUMMIT project foresees the development of a handbook for professionals and training material, which will be available online on Missing Children Europe’s website and linked to all partners’ websites.



2.2 Aims of the study

The aim of this research project is to identify good practices and key challenges across the EU in the prevention of, and response to, vulnerable unaccompanied children who go missing from reception centres and other types of care. The results of the study will be used to develop the structure and content of the aforementioned good practice handbook and training material for professionals.

We have identified four priority areas of discussion, which are:

- (a) Prevention activities;
- (b) Response to an unaccompanied minor going missing;
- (c) Aftercare; and
- (d) Training.



2.3 Methodology

In order to uncover good practices and key challenges across the EU, this project used a mixed methods approach. One task force meeting and two steering group meetings served as focus groups, which were to discuss the issue of disappearances in the context of what the project could achieve and how. The task force meeting, which was held on 24th October 2014, included members of the steering group and associate partners. The conversation focused on good practices and key challenges in the sample countries. During the two steering group meetings, which took place on 22nd May and 9th October 2015, members of the steering group and partners were presented with the results of the analysis of the data collected and the structure and content of this report were discussed.

2.3.1 Countries participating in study

Following the first task force meeting, a decision was taken to collect data from **seven key countries: Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom**. This selection allowed us to study and compare practices in some of those countries considered “of transit” or “of destination” in the mind of many migrant children. Countries “of transit” are those which are likely to be the first Member State of the EU where the migrant sets foot, because of their geographical position, but do not coincide with the country where the migrant plans to lodge an application for international protection. The target-country is often referred to as country “of destination”. Some countries can be “of transit” also because their borders need to be crossed to reach the final destination. Disappearances of unaccompanied children have been reported in every one of the studied countries. The opportunity to collect information in countries where the 116 000 hotlines associate partners operate was also taken into account.

2.3.2 Stakeholders targeted

Given the varying responsibilities of the stakeholders or actors involved in the situation of unaccompanied child and missing children, three stakeholders’ groups were targeted.

(1) Law enforcement agencies

National police forces: contact was established with both local police and with coordinating units specialised in missing cases or in supporting the work of officers at local level.

Interpol: an international police organization, with 190 member countries. The role of Interpol is to enable better cooperation between police around the world, especially through their high-tech infrastructure offering technical and operational support. INTERPOL’s General Secretariat publishes the Yellow Notices at the request of National Central Bureaus (NCBs) and authorised entities. A Yellow Notice helps locate missing persons, often children, or helps identify persons who are unable to identify themselves.

(2) Carers

We have contacted operators working in reception centres that host unaccompanied children. These reception facilities provide housing, food, basic health care and pocket money for their inhabitants. The characteristics of these services vary from one facility to another, both within a country and the region. In some cases, these facilities host only unaccompanied children, in other cases the children hosted are mixed with those coming from different non-migrant backgrounds.

We have also involved guardians, which are the representatives appointed to assist and support unaccompanied children. Guardians have an important role to safeguard the child’s best interests and well-being. In some systems, the guardian has the mandate to arrange all basic needs and to assist them in the asylum procedure, return, Dublin procedures, family



tracing, etc. The EU asylum acquis requires that Member States ensure as soon as possible the necessary representation of unaccompanied children by legal guardianship (or, where necessary, by an organisation which is responsible for the care and well-being of minors, or by any other appropriate representation). Professional guardianship is not the rule in the EU and guardianship systems are not established in all EU countries. For example, there is not a guardianship system in Ireland and UK. However, UK is currently piloting a guardianship system in Northern Ireland.

(3) Hotlines for missing children, operated through the European number 116 000

The 116 000 hotline for missing children was reserved in 2007 by the European Commission and has been implemented gradually at national level since. Today the hotline is operational in 27 EU Member States as well as in Serbia and Albania. Finland remains the only EU state without a 116 000 missing children hotline.

Operational 116 000 hotlines have generated tangible and real change for the life of parents and children across Europe. Through the number parents and children alike, whether at home or in another European country, have obtained free emotional, psychological, social, legal and administrative support. This holistic and multidisciplinary approach is necessary to deal with the specific needs of parents and children calling the hotline.

2.3.3 Methods for data collection

Data was collected using online surveys and phone/face-to-face interviews. Upon a positive ethical review from the University of Portsmouth ethics committee, Missing Children Europe invited participants to take part in surveys and interviews via email, with a personalised letter of invitation providing information about the aims of the project and the methodology.

Lists of suggested contacts per country (see table 1) were collected by the task force and shared with Missing Children Europe, who sent the personal letters of invitation via email. Participation in surveys was anonymous, and all information on interviewed professionals was managed by Missing Children Europe exclusively, to ensure the confidentiality.

Questions in the online surveys and interviews focused on four areas of action, namely:

- > Prevention of disappearances
- > Response to disappearances
- > After care of an unaccompanied child who returned or was found after disappearing
- > Training

Each area of action was assessed in terms of official procedures, actual practice, interagency cooperation, good practices and key challenges.

Online surveys

107 professionals from the seven aforementioned countries were invited to take part in the online surveys in their working language, and two reminders were sent. Three different online surveys were developed, targeting the three groups of stakeholders. The online surveys were developed via Survey Monkey and the anonymity of the participant was ensured. Invited participants could reply between 16th February 2015 and 16th March 2015. The online surveys were translated from English into Italian, Greek, French and Spanish in order to allow participants to express themselves freely. The responses were translated back into English for analysis. Missing Children Europe received 41 responses to the online surveys.

Phone Interviews

17 semi-structured interviews of around one hour each were carried out from March to



April 2015. All interviews were done by telephone with identified national stakeholders from the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium and Spain. Interviews were conducted in Italian, French, English and Spanish, according to the language skills of interviewers. Interviews were tape recorded, translated into English and transcribed.

2.3.4 Methods for data analysis

Data gathered was saved in a password protected Excel/SPSS file. Analysis of the qualitative material was done in NVIVO. NVIVO is a qualitative analysis software package, used for analysing unstructured data, mainly text-based. It allows a researcher to quickly interpret data using powerful search, query and visualisation tools.³¹

³¹ NVIVO- http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx



3 Results

3.1 The sample

The sample obtained is relatively small, as it was quite difficult to identify professionals to invite to take part in the study, especially in the law enforcement sector. Invited officials often declined the invitation because they: 1) did not deal specifically with unaccompanied children, 2) did not feel in a position to express their opinion, even if they worked with unaccompanied children, or 3) were not willing to participate. Therefore, results are presented showing the number of responses rather than using percentages.

However, the length and the level of detail used in the surveys and interviews allowed us to collect a substantial amount of data and content for analysis. Interestingly, many issues raised in this report were consistently identified by participants from the sample countries.

The findings cannot be generalised as practices vary even within the countries that took part in this study. The results presented below should be considered as examples and a snapshot, rather than an outline or assessment of practices across Member States. This is perfectly in line with the purpose to inform readers of practices and challenges that they may identify with or learn from, to enhance an open exchange of thoughts and experiences and stimulate an informed debate that can hopefully be shared by professionals across the EU.

It is also important to note that some, among the professionals who participated in the surveys, did not reply to all questions. Some questions had intentionally been left blank. Among the reasons for this behaviour, we can suppose: 1) the participant did not have enough information to answer; and/or 2) the participant did not want to give an answer that could draw criticism or judgment.

3.1.1 Countries participating in study



41 participants from the seven sample countries responded to the online surveys. Most responses came from Belgium and Greece. 17 semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants from four countries, i.e. the UK, Belgium, Italy and Spain. Overall, 58 participants took part in the study.

Table 1 – Overview of participants

	Hotlines		Guardians and carers		Law enforcement agencies	
	Online Surveys	Interviews	Online Surveys	Interviews	Online Surveys	Interviews
Belgium	4	0	6	2	0	2
Greece	3	0	5	0	2	0
Italy	1	0	1	3	0	2
Cyprus	2	0	3	0	0	0
UK	1	0	0	4	3	3
Spain	1	0	3	1	0	0
Ireland	1	0	5	0	0	0
Total	13	0	23	10	5	7

3.1.2 Type of group

As seen in table above, the majority of responses to the online surveys were from guardians and carers (23) followed by the 116 000 hotlines (13). Interviews were mainly with guardians and carers (10) as well as representatives from law enforcement agencies (7).

3.1.3 Role in their organisation

The participants carry out a variety of roles in relation to dealing with unaccompanied children. Not all participants in the online surveys indicated their role within their organisation.

Carers

Answers were collected from professionals identifying themselves as guardians (8), reception centre operators (4) and workers in social



services (6). Some operators from reception centres were working specifically with unaccompanied children and others in mixed institutes. Guardians who responded were both professional and voluntary. We also collected data from NGOs providing support on specific matters (e.g. trafficking).

Law enforcement agencies

The participants in the surveys from law enforcement agencies were police officers (2) and other (unspecified) (2). Interviews were conducted with national coordinating units.

Hotlines for missing children

More than one participant per hotline was invited to take part in this exercise. We asked for participants to consist of, when possible, one hotline operator and one person from management, to have a more rounded perspective on the role and contribution of hotlines. Staff that indicated their role as operators (2) and managers (6).

3.1.4 Number of unaccompanied child cases participants have personally handled

Participants were asked how many cases of unaccompanied minors they have personally handled in their professional capacity. While not all participants responded to this question, it is possible to conclude that the majority of participants in this study had considerable experience in dealing with unaccompanied children.

Table 2 – Cases of unaccompanied children handled by participants

	Online Surveys		Interviews with carers
	Care	LEA	
None	1	2	0
1-10	1	1	1
11-50	0	0	1
51-100	4	0	1
Over 100	13	2	8

3.1.5 Number of unaccompanied children went missing

Participants were asked how many cases of unaccompanied children they handled involved a child who went missing. While there were some missing answers, the majority of participants indicate a fairly large number of instances of this group of children going missing. These answers, compared to the previous table, seem to support previous findings regarding how frequently these children go missing.



Table 3 – Cases of missing unaccompanied children handled by participants

	Online Surveys			Interviews with carers
	Care	LEA	Hotlines	
None	5	3	4	0
1-10	6	1	7	5
11-50	7	0	1	2
51-100	1	0	1	1
Over 100	1	0	0	3

Of 29 carers who said they had handled more than one case, 26 said that at least one child went missing. Among the 26 carers who said they had handled more than 50 cases of unaccompanied children, 15 said that more than ten children went missing and six among them reported that more than 50 of these children went missing. Only four of the carers that have worked with unaccompanied children said that no unaccompanied child under their care went missing. These carers work in Italy, Spain and Greece.

The vast majority of hotlines operators interviewed reported to have dealt with missing unaccompanied children cases. However, we know that only in the UK and Ireland, among the countries studied, operators have never dealt with a case of a missing unaccompanied child. Interestingly, the number of cases dealt by hotlines in the seven countries studied does not correspond with the number of cases dealt by carers – which reveals that the large majority of missing unaccompanied children are actually not reported to hotlines for missing children.

3.1.6 Number of unaccompanied children found

Due to concerns raised by previous studies about the low percentage of recovery of this population of children and the risks they are exposed to while missing, participants were asked how many of the missing unaccompanied children were later found. The responses from the online surveys indicate only a small proportion of children are found, compared to the number who go missing, as indicated in table above. The vast majority of the participants who were interviewed stated similar concerns however, those could not be quantified into similar figures. Several participants said “very few”, “14% of 300 of them”, etc. Again, this corroborates previous literature.

Table 4 – Cases of found unaccompanied children handled by participants

	Online Surveys	
	Care	LEA
None	8	4
1-10	10	0
11-50	2	0
51-100	0	0
Over 100	0	0

If we compare this table with the previous one, we understand that three among the carers who previously said they have witnessed disappearances of unaccompanied children reported that none of them were found. In general, there is absolutely no correspondence between the number of missing cases and the number of found cases – which suggests that it is not possible to establish the whereabouts of the majority of unaccompanied children who



go missing. While nine carers reported earlier to have witnessed the disappearance of more than ten children under their care, only two reported that more than ten cases were solved. Interestingly, the only professional law enforcement professional who reported to have being professionally involved in up to ten cases, reported also that none of the children were found.

Observations

- > Almost all responding reception centres operators, guardians and social services with experience in working with unaccompanied children have experienced the disappearance of a child under their care. This suggests that the phenomenon in the seven countries studied is very common.
- > Despite the level of disappearances, it is very difficult to identify police officers or, more generally, law enforcement agents, who have experience in cases of disappearances of unaccompanied migrant children. Even among those few who decided to participate in the study, not all have experience in this field.
- > According to the experience of the participants in this study, in the majority of cases missing unaccompanied children are not found.



3.2 Preventing an unaccompanied child from going missing

3.2.1 Involvement in prevention activities

Case

There is a difference between the needs that unaccompanied children perceive themselves to have and their real needs, for a child of that age. A 15 year old unaccompanied boy arrived in the south of Italy some time ago. He did not want to go to school, he wanted to work, earn money and send it to his family in Eritrea. Instead, his educator thought that he needed to learn the language of the country successfully, complete basic education, and develop as a person and to integrate with the community, before being able to work. Educators explained to him the importance of following this path and he thought that they were wrong.

However, he stayed. He learned to be patient. He went to school, he integrated with the community of the village where the reception centre was located and he became an adult. It was very difficult to accompany him through adolescence. He was a teenager, an asylum seeker and a migrant: educators need to consider the multiple vulnerabilities together.

When he was 18 years old, he left the centre. Two years later, he visited his educators and said: You were right. He is now working as a linguistic mediator in Sicily. He supports other children that arrive in Italy alone and he explains to them that being patient and trusting carers pays off.



Participants were asked about their involvement in prevention activities. The table below shows that according to participants in this sample, the 116 000 hotlines are not frequently involved in prevention activities and that it is more the work of carers and guardians. There were no responses to this question from law enforcement agencies.

Table 5 – How often are you involved in activities to prevent unaccompanied children from going missing?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
Hotlines	0	0	1	4	6	0
Guardians and carers	4	3	4	2	2	1
Total	4	3	5	6	8	1

Interestingly, of the 26 participants who responded as to how valuable their involvement in prevention activities is, most participants considered their involvement valuable. This is particularly true in the case of carers and guardians. The large majority of hotlines' staff surveyed have rarely or never been involved in prevention activities. Interestingly, among some of the staff who have been involved in these cases, the involvement of a hotline is considered very valuable or valuable in most cases.



Table 6 – How often do you value your involvement in activities to prevent unaccompanied children from going missing?

	Very valuable	Valuable in most cases	Valuable sometimes	Rarely valuable	Not valuable	I don't know
Hotlines	1	1	0	2	3	1
Guardians and carers	2	5	5	1	1	2
Law enforcement agencies	0	1	1	0	0	0
Total	3	7	6	3	4	3

3.2.2 Collection of identifying information

Participants in the online surveys among care services and law enforcement agencies were asked how often they register the personal data of unaccompanied children who are detected within the territory of their country and what type of information is collected about an unaccompanied child. The responses focused on physiological identifying data and background information:

Table 7 – Could you please indicate whether you collect the following information for an unaccompanied child in your care?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
Age	18	1	0	0	0	0
Gender	19	0	0	0	0	0
Nationality	19	0	0	0	0	0
Picture	10	3	0	3	2	0
Fingerprints	2	1	0	0	0	0
If the child has been a victim of crime	15	1	1	1	0	0
If the child has been a victim of smuggling/trafficking	17	0	1	1	0	0
Willingness to apply for asylum	17	2	0	0	0	0
Willingness to ask for family reunification	16	1	1	0	0	0
Medical needs	15	4	0	0	0	0



The table above suggests that the majority of participants that answered this question, collect this type of information in most if not all cases. It is worth noting that whether they collected a picture received more mixed responses and if they took fingerprints seemed to be a less frequent practice.

When asked to expand on this issue, participants in surveys and interviews stated that the following information was also gathered

Physiological:

- > Characteristics of their appearance (including information about tattoos, scars, etc.)
- > DNA

Background information:

- > Country of origin
- > Country of destination (according to the migration plan of the child)
- > Language/s spoken
- > Education needs
- > Family background- names, addresses and contact details of relatives
- > The child's expectations about education, work, fun
- > The child's likes and dislikes
- > Who the child travelled with
- > Reasons for travelling
- > Whether they have any documents with them

Participants highlighted several key challenges in relation to collecting identifying information from the unaccompanied children.

First, several participants discussed the information needs to be collected very quickly, in order to secure collection, should the child disappear quickly, or move to the management of another agency. For example,

“We know that many children arrive in Belgium on their way to another country in Europe, in transit, and we also see that they very quickly go missing, because the family comes to get them.”

Law enforcement officer, BE

“We should not forget that minors go missing even before being identified. Therefore, procedures need to be very fast, otherwise there is the risk that these minors could abscond already.”

Law enforcement officer, IT



Second, the speed of access to the children and understanding their needs is slowed down by bureaucracy (e.g. excessively complicated administrative procedures), which hampers intervention and prevention activities.

"We could do with a proper discussion with the child at the point where he comes in, rather than wait three or four or five days down the line, when a social worker will come and have that discussion, but by then it's too late."

Law enforcement officer, UK

"I think they need to respond quickly, as soon as a child has come through and is identified as an unaccompanied child, we need someone from social services to be there and do the age assessment so that there is no question about how we should be treating this child."

Law enforcement officer, UK

Bureaucracy during the process of information collection is also evident sometimes in relation to verifying the age of the child and putting in place a care plan.

"This sort of uncertainty doesn't help in getting the best response from the agencies. We need prompt age assessment and discussion with the child about their situation."

Law enforcement officer, UK

Third, even when information is collected, participants emphasised the lack of exchange of information between agencies as a cause of frustration. Participants highlighted how lack of information sharing practices leads to data being lost or simply unknown to other agencies. As a possible solution to this issue, several participants suggested developing and using a joint database that will enable immediate information sharing between agencies.

"...this is a big challenge, because we take fingerprints, but there is a need to create a database with that, the possibility to exchange this information...this is not fluid and easy yet, at all levels. At national level, the databases of the police are not accessible for us therefore, we need agreements that allow us to exchange this data in case of missing..."

Child protection authority, BE

"One of the key frustrations in my area is the fact we miss opportunities to get the right information about these children so quite often when they go missing, we will ask for basic information such as a photo and a proper description of the child and they can't even give us that. It's very much following a process, but they haven't actually stopped to think about what information we might need."

Law enforcement officer, UK



Fourth, different laws and policies in EU Member States may also pose challenges in work between countries. For example, while some countries will take fingerprints of children, other countries will not, or only when children are over 14.

“Fingerprinting should not be done under 14 years old, even if someone does it, but the law does not provide for this.”

Reception centre worker, IT

“They took the children’s DNA so that when they went missing they may be able to track them. Good for identification, when they go missing a problem is that no one knows who they are as many don’t have documents. (...) they are working within the law but it is a slightly controversial method as the children don’t give consent.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK

Several good practices have also been identified by participants:

First, a proactive system to deal with unaccompanied children as they arrive at known points of travel such as, ports and airports. This includes assessing the needs of the children and their families.

“When young children arrive at the airport, there’s always someone waiting for the children, and when the child has been held by the police because he has no legal entitlement to enter the country, the person also goes to the police to ask for the child, and then it’s very important for us to be able to work with this person, so the police give us the information, the name, contact number and we can then contact this person, and sometimes we find family, or sometimes someone is just waiting for the child to go to France and then the person is important because through them we can contact the family in France, and tell them: your child/nephew/cousin is here in Belgium, can you come, can we work together to find a legal way to let the child come to you.”

Guardian, BE



Second, activities to buy time and facilitate reception staff to engage with the children and create some rapport and trust.

“Also, we try to buy time; with the younger children, it’s not so difficult but, with the older children, teenagers, we try to do the laundry immediately, so then, while the clothes are being washed, they won’t go away, as they wait for the laundry. Sometimes, we try to take extra time with the laundry, to do it twice or a bit longer; in that period, we try to give them all the information and also explain the system.”

Reception centre worker, BE

Third, it will be useful to develop a standardised form that will allow staff to collect information as consistently as possible.

“We have developed a document: it’s in Dutch, a checklist for all the staff. If a new child comes in, they have to follow it. The people who do the first reception; afterwards, they have to fill in their checklists and the checklists will provide a risk estimation about the risks.”

Reception centre worker, BE

“Once the minor has been identified, he is given this code. A file is created containing name, surname, date of birth and eventually alias, then this file is shared with the Ministry of Labour and police forces, with information about the administration that took him under care, his gender, his age. The file is very complex and contains this identification code that he will have until he is in Italy and an adult.”

Law enforcement officer, IT



Fourth, the collection of information about the unaccompanied child is done as quickly as possible.

“They often look at the picture of the child that is taken as soon as they come into contact with the authorities so that when they do go missing they know what they look like. This can help gather info from locals; this would be good on the database.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK

3.2.3 Assessing likelihood of unaccompanied child to go missing

Case

A 14 year old unaccompanied migrant child was intercepted by the police in Belgium while in the hand of smugglers and immediately assigned to a reception centre for children in Brussels. That afternoon, the operators of the reception centre had planned a trip to Leuven, a nice activity for the guests of the centre. The newcomer was also invited to join the group and the cultural activity.

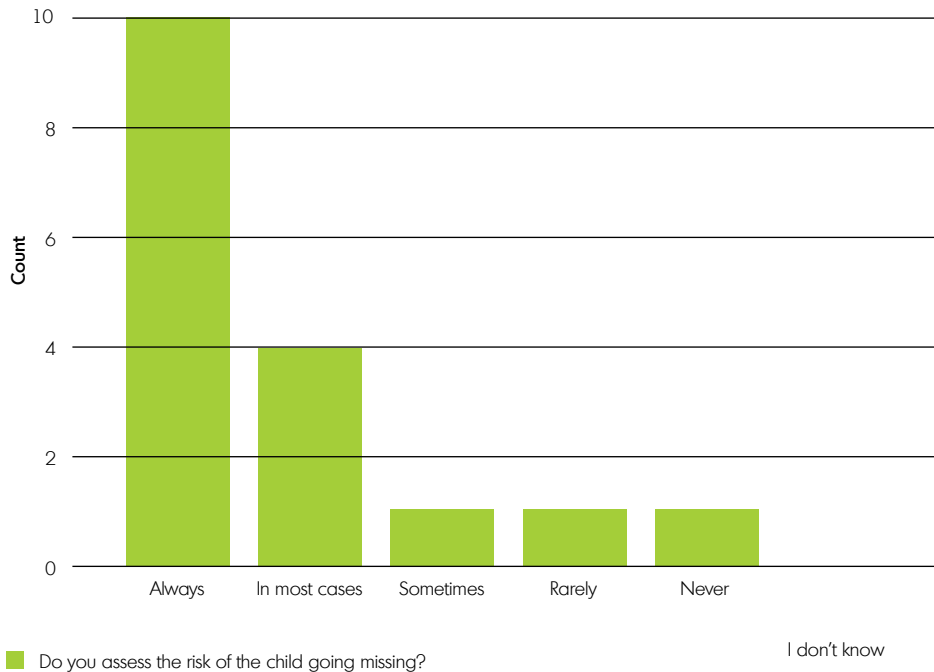
The group arrived in Leuven and started the visit. After a couple of hours, the operators accompanying the group realised that the new boy was not with them anymore. At the end of the trip, they went back to Brussels, and only at that time informed the police of the disappearance of the child.

No assessment of the risks of disappearance of the boy and the risks he could face was done before deciding to take him to Leuven. This resulted in two bad decisions for the safety of this child: taking him on the trip from which he could more easily disappear and delaying the report of the disappearance.

Participants were asked whether, as part of their role, they assess the risk of an unaccompanied child going missing. The vast majority of responses suggest that the risk of going missing is assessed by staff at reception centres as well as guardians. Interestingly, all the responses to these questions were from guardians and carers.



Figure 1 – Do you assess the risk of the child going missing?



Participants were also asked with which other agencies they evaluate the risk. It seems that the majority of discussions between agencies regarding the risk of an unaccompanied child going missing is between guardians, staff at reception centres, the police and social services. It is interesting to note that these discussions do not seem to include Interpol and 116 000 hotlines. These agencies are not expected to be involved with assessing the risk of specific cases of unaccompanied children who may go missing. However, given the international elements and cross border nature of these types of cases, these organisations may have a role to play in prevention activities through communication with law enforcement agencies, carers and hotlines and providing input on the broader issues of migration patterns and disappearances in specific countries that may be linked to international organised crime, such as human trafficking that may be targeting specific groups of unaccompanied children, based on their age, gender or country of origin.

Table 9 – With which other parties do you evaluate this risk?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
Police	7	3	3	0	3	0
Border Authorities	1	4	0	3	5	0
Interpol	0	0	2	2	8	0
Guardians	7	3	1	0	3	0
Reception Centres	7	2	2	1	2	0
116 000 Hotlines	1	0	0	3	9	0
Social Services	8	3	1	2	0	0
Health Services	4	1	2	2	4	0
NGOs	3	1	2	3	3	0

One participant from the UK indicated that there is no procedure to evaluate the risk of an unaccompanied child going missing with other agencies. A participant from Greece indicated that a prosecutor assesses the risk. It is important to note that due to the small number of responses it is not possible to generalise the common practices across these countries.

When the risk of an unaccompanied child going missing is assessed as high the following actions may take place and are considered good practices:

- Informing the unaccompanied child of the risks if they leave care and encouraging them not to leave
- Extending the work with the unaccompanied child. This may involve more one-to-one activities or monitoring of children by staff at all times. For example, a child may be accompanied by staff to school and back. This also includes introducing an opportunity to build rapport with the child to try to understand their story and needs.



- Having a multi-agency care plan. This may involve a meeting, but more likely telephone conversation about the child, to agree a care plan (see Ch. 3.3.6 for more details on examples of multi-agency bodies).
- Frequent re-evaluation of the current placement
- Staff keeping the telephone and/or money of the child
- Sharing information with other agencies such as the police and social services. Participants indicated they contact authorities or law enforcement agencies with the description and details of the unaccompanied child in case they disappear.

“When a child is identified as at potential risk of going missing, as much information on the child is fed to the police as possible on day one. Then the police upload all of that information into their system so that if the child actually goes missing, they all have the information they need to do the best they can to try to find the child.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services when trafficked children, UK

Participants also identified key challenges in relation to the risk assessment phase:

First, many professionals who care for children were not aware of the existence of any standardised criteria to assess against. Thus, there is no official risk assessment process.

Second, a child may be adamant to leave and staff are unable to physically stop them.

“When there is a migratory plan they will leave. Notwithstanding our efforts, they are distant from the first moment, they are not interested.”

Reception centre worker, IT

Third, when staff inform the police of concerns about a risk of a disappearance some officers are not motivated to handle these cases. Concerns may be in relation to the child being in contact with traffickers. It may also be that staff become suspicious that a child will move on to try and reach family independently.

“Some of the local police teams don’t really see it as a priority so it’s a bit of an ongoing battle.”

Social Service, UK

Some interviewed professionals have recognised behavioural patterns related to the nationality of the child. They reported that unaccompanied children from some countries will go missing with more probability than others. The nationality of the child could therefore, be an element that could be included in the list of indicators of the risk that the child will go missing.



"A big percentage of our children going missing once they're in the UK are Vietnamese and we believe they not just go missing; this has to do with other issues there, maybe traffickers."

Social Services, UK

"The disappearance cases that we had are especially Moroccan kids, almost a hundred percent."

Reception centre worker, ES

"I can say that last year 3,394 Eritreans arrived, and today there are no more Eritreans in the reception centres. Same about Somalia, 1,481 arrived, and very few stayed. (...) We have also traced some children in Milan, Egyptian children, I have been recognized many times by them, who left reception centres because they have in Rome and Milan some strong communities/ points of reference, meaning people who help them to find a job. What kind of job... this is another story."

Save the Children, IT

Protected reception: the Dutch approach to preventing disappearances

In order to prevent more disappearances, in January 2008, the Minister of Immigration Affairs and Integration started a two-year pilot for 13 years old (or older) unaccompanied children, for whom it has been established, based on the experiences of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), that they are greatly at risk of disappearing because of human trafficking.

Since then, such children have been received in special, small-scale protection centres (BOs). In the first weeks after arrival, they are only allowed to leave the premises with prior permission or a staff escort. The children receive intensive coaching by specialized mentors, attend a special school, and have access to specialist psychiatric care by transcultural psychiatrists. After the two years the project was evaluated.

Since the project began, the total number of disappearances from all reception facilities (including BO) of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) decreased.

At the beginning the guardians of the specialized organization NIDOS were usually those making this assessment on the basis of their own criteria (nationality and individual characteristics, such as a child claiming to be brought to the Netherlands without having paid, claiming to be assisted by an unknown white man, claiming to be assaulted by a travel agent, or seeming to be terrified). This assessment was exposed to the criticism of lacking empirical foundation. Currently, all referrals to protected reception are made by two guardians. The moment the guardians indicate a need for a minor to stay in BO, Nidos inquires with the aliens' police and the IND if they have also seen indications to refer to BO. A feedback loop system is in place, whereby every month the BO mentors inform Nidos guardians in the Central Reception Location to what extent they believe the initial indication has been correct or not.

The placement and stay in BO was also at risk of being qualified as a 'deprivation of liberty', as the necessary judicial review is lacking and no legal aid is provided to the child (regarding their placement in protected reception). The BO still functions without a clear legal basis, but the Minister argued that in legal terms no deprivation of liberty takes place, deciding not to take further action as the children are not 'locked up' but merely under tight supervision, and that many checks and balances are in place. The supervision period – in which it can



be argued that a deprivation of liberty takes place – has shortened and where the children were at first uncomfortable with their position, this is currently no longer the case. A representative says: “The doors are not locked. It is true that no one can go in from the outside, but every minor who wants to go out, can go out. We once started with a target group that you so to speak had to lock in (Nigerian girls). The last few years, however, we take care of minors who want to be protected and are very happy with the safety that is being offered (...). More and more we conclude that there are children who fit in the current reception facility perfectly. However, it also happens more often that we receive groups of minors, including the Vietnamese, who want to leave immediately. We cannot keep them inside”.

From an institutional perspective, it is important to note that many actors collectively meet each other during the so-called ‘COBO Meeting’ (Casuistic Consultation BO).

Co-ordinated by Nidos, representatives from the Police, COA, Jade (contracted to run the protected reception facilities), the Co-ordination Centre for Human Trafficking (CoMensha), the Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V), the IND, the Dutch Centre of Expertise on Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling (EMM), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Legal Aid Board come together every eight weeks. The goal of the meeting is to share information, strengthen the network, and present other practical advice relating to the BO.



3.2.4. Inform unaccompanied child their rights, regulations and procedures

Case

During a disembarkation in Lampedusa in 2013, a 13 year old unaccompanied child arrived in Italy together with 44 other minors. The boy met an operator from the NGO supporting the authorities in the initial reception centre. He said he had an uncle in Germany and his plan was to reach him. After a quick analysis of the situation, the operator realized that it was very likely that the child would be assigned to a reception centre in Sicily and that he would have probably gone missing in a few hours to get closer to Germany. After flagging this risk, the NGO convinced the police that it was better to take the child to Rome. The aim was to prevent all risks which the child could incur in between Sicily and Rome, on his way to Germany, and also to buy time with him and try to change his mind.

The NGO found, in Rome, a very good community who welcomed the child and decided to support the process for family reunification. Happy and safe the child called his father to inform him about the good news and the next steps. The father did not accept his desire to stay in Rome. Instead, he had clear orders. "Your uncle is not legal in Germany; he doesn't have the documents needed. You cannot stay in Rome. You have to go to the UK. This is where I want to go." This kid would have preferred to stay in Italy, with people that he had learned to trust, but after the conversation with his father, he left.

Did the father know what the child would have to go through on his way to

Germany? Was he aware of the conditions in which children live in Calais? Was the father reunited with the child that he forced into this trip?

Procedures

Providing an unaccompanied child with information was raised in previous publications as an important element of prevention activities. Guardians and carers were therefore, asked what information they provide to the unaccompanied child. Most participants provided the information below very frequently, except for Dublin III rules which received more mixed responses. This may depend on the circumstances of the cases and in some countries the responsibility of immigration authorities.



Table 10 – Do you explain any of the following to the unaccompanied child in your care?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
Provide child with your contact details	14	1	0	0	0	0
Dublin III rules	7	2	3	0	2	0
Family reunification procedures and possibilities	11	3	1	0	0	0
Asylum procedure	14	1	0	0	0	0
Procedure for victims of trafficking	12	3	0	0	0	0
Importance of personal interview	14	0	0	0	1	0
Right to be provided free of charge with legal and procedural information	13	1	1	0	0	0
Right to be assisted by a legal representative	13	1	1	0	0	0
Role of the guardian	12	1	1	0	1	0
Risks which child could incur if they leave the structure	15	0	0	0	0	0
Rights related to reception and accommodation	14	1	0	0	0	0



Other types of information that may be shared with unaccompanied children are:

- Right to healthcare services
- Right to education
- Complaint procedure
- Care options
- Rules and regulations
- Information about the roles of different professionals
- Geographical information about where they are

Informing the children about the risks they face if they go missing was highlighted as fundamental in the interviews.

“We mention to them that we know this and we can also prepare them about the dangers: you can be caught by the police, you can be sent back, and to go to the UK you have to go by boat or in a car, and it’s dangerous, there are risks. As I said, we tell them what we know, we try to talk about this and make it an issue.”

Guardian, BE

Sharing information with unaccompanied children also involves attempts by staff to make contact with the child’s family and inform them about the risks which the child could incur travelling and their rights.

“Then we give them information about the crossing, how dangerous it is or the fact that in England life is also difficult; they all think that it’s heaven for migrants. Then, we also explain how the protection system in Belgium works and we say: maybe you can phone your parents, and we can explain together that you are safe here.”

Guardian, BE

Participants were asked how effective they think providing information is in preventing unaccompanied children from going missing. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, information shared with the children is regarded fairly positively. However, it is important to investigate this issue further - by asking the unaccompanied children themselves what type of information is most useful to them, from whom they would feel more comfortable to receive it, with whom they should discuss it and whether that information has been a factor that prevented them from leaving their care arrangement.



Table 11 – How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the following information given to the unaccompanied child to mitigate the risk of disappearance?

	Very effective	Quite effective	Somehow effective	Scarcely effective	Not effective	I don't know
Provide child with your contact details	7	4	0	1	2	0
Dublin III rules	5	1	4	1	3	3
Family reunification procedures and possibilities	7	2	3	1	1	1
Asylum procedure	6	4	3	1	1	3
Procedure for victims of trafficking	6	4	5	0	1	2
Importance of personal interview	6	5	2	2	0	3
Right to be provided free of charge with legal and procedural information	8	3	3	3	0	1
Right to be assisted by a legal representative	7	4	3	3	0	1
Role of the guardian	7	5	2	2	1	1
Risks which child could incur if they leave the structure	5	5	4	1	1	2
Rights related to reception and accommodation	7	5	2	3	0	1



Specific key challenges in this area are:

First, the complexity of legal processes is difficult to explain, particularly when the child is young, does not speak the local language and comes from a very different culture.

"We explain to them all the opportunities to be regularly transferred, in the framework of Dublin or Italian Law, if the migration is internal. We explain to them how to go from one city to another without the need to pay a compatriot to help you. We try to explain the risks and we have also a brochure with images that we produced last year, when disappearances became systematic, at least to increase awareness of minors in relation to those risks. In fact, to explain what it means to be involved in illegal activity is not easy."

Save the Children, Italy

Second, the lengthy legal processes.

"During the first interviews, their reaction was "We don't want to stay in Italy, we want to go to other European countries". Second question: who do you have in those countries? Various answers. When they replied we have relatives, we explained the new Dublin system. When they were asking about the timeframe, we have always replied honestly, grounding our answer on the average time for procedures, therefore saying six months. Reactions have always been: "Thanks, but in one week I get there alone." (Save the Children Italy)

In order to overcome some of these challenges, participants shared a number of good practices:

As staff attempt to bond with the unaccompanied children some participants highlighted repeatedly the importance of going beyond the literal explanation of rules and procedures and making sure that children are part of the discussion and that they appreciate staff have a genuine care for their well-being.

"It's about a young person understanding what is happening and being able to have his or her voice heard and to know what is to come and everyone working together around that young person."

NGO supporting LEA and social services when trafficked children, UK



"I think it's important to try to empathise with their situation, I think it's more about how you interact with the child than what you say. It's about reassuring them that you do understand what they are going through and what might happen to them if they go missing."

NGO supporting LEA and social services when trafficked children, UK

This is a very important point that interviewees highlighted as a key element to preventing children going missing.

In Italy overcoming language and cultural issues was facilitated by the use of cultural mediators.

"Cultural-linguistic mediators are also important in the centres where minors are brought. We have seen some people going missing following some misunderstanding with operators, due to language issues."

Save the Children Italy

In some countries, guardians and staff at reception centres provide the unaccompanied child with information using leaflets and videos in their spoken languages.

Third, to continuously inform the unaccompanied child about what the process is and what is likely to happen next.

"It is also important to update children continuously about what is happening with him, what he is waiting for, what are the difficulties of the non-Italian system. We need to explain to him why he is living in inadequate conditions for example, telling him that before him 12,000 other children in the same condition arrived and to find a place for everyone is difficult because only two people are in charge."

Save the Children, Italy

Fourth, using creative ways to highlight to unaccompanied children that they are not alone and that other children are going through similar experiences. This is done through videos made by other unaccompanied children or having support groups in reception centres so that children can discuss their travel experiences as well as needs and fears with other children.

"Well, young people have been trying to put together a leaflet for young people to explain the different sorts of systems here. A lot of young people are not sure – they might have to pay for their care or they're not sure about what their entitlements might be. So we're trying to put a leaflet together with some helpful numbers on it, as well as what their entitlements are."

"I think what young people have said before that once they realised this has happened to other people, that helped them to move on and understand a bit more."

Social Services, UK



3.2.5 Collaboration with other agencies in prevention activities

Participants were asked who they cooperate with in preventing the disappearance of unaccompanied children. It seems that most professionals cooperate with the police, social services and NGOs. Participants indicated they are less likely to cooperate with border authorities, Interpol, 116 000 hotlines and health services. Given the international element and cross border nature of these types of cases, these organisations may have a role to play in prevention activities. This is not in relation to specific cases but the broader issues of migration and disappearances that may be linked to international organised crime, such as human trafficking.

Table 12 – With which other parties do you collaborate in preventing the disappearance of an unaccompanied child?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
Police	11	4	0	1	5	0
Border Authorities	3	1	2	2	7	0
Interpol	2	0	1	1	10	0
Guardians	9	3	1	1	3	0
116 000 Hotlines	4	1	1	3	8	0
Social Services	13	2	2	2	2	0
Health Services	4	2	2	2	7	0
NGOs	6	3	2	2	5	0
Public	2	0	3	3	4	0
Volunteers	4	1	1	4	8	0



Agencies also cooperate with families of unaccompanied children as well as with the local community.

When asked how efficient cooperation is with other agencies in prevention activities, participants' responses were fairly mixed, with more positive responses in relation to cooperation with the police, guardians, social services and NGOs. It is important to highlight that cooperation with border authorities and Interpol was less favourable.

Table 13 – How efficient do you evaluate the collaboration with other actors in preventing the disappearance of an unaccompanied migrant minor?

	Very efficient	In most cases efficient	Sometimes efficient	Rarely efficient	Inefficient	I don't know
Police	7	3	4	1	1	3
Border Authorities	2	1	4	4	2	2
Interpol	1	1	4	2	1	8
Guardians	3	4	2	2	1	4
116 000 Hotlines	1	4	1	3	2	6
Social Services	5	3	4	4	0	5
Health Services	3	3	4	4	2	4
NGOs	3	4	3	3	2	4
Public	2	3	0	4	3	3
Volunteers	2	3	0	5	3	4

Concerns about cooperation with other agencies received the most attention from participants, who identified a number of key challenges:

First, a few participants expressed their frustration at the lack of prevention activities, stating “there is nothing”, etc. Lack of cooperation in



preventative activities may also be due to the culture of agencies who focus on reactive actions rather than preventative measures. For example,

"I think we miss strategic meetings, all together, this never happens. Certainly it would be useful to meet periodically and sum up the situation, discuss how practices develop with experience, here in Calabria (Italy) or somewhere else. Instead, we work always in an emergency situation. We are very good in managing the urgency, but less good in strategies of a continuative response, in building on the urgency."

Reception centre worker, IT

Second, the lack of information sharing between agencies has been repeatedly highlighted by participants. Information that one agency gathers may never be shared with others. For example,

"Maybe the police could work a little bit more like that. I've missed sometimes [the opportunity] to have closer contact with the police forces, so they could know a little better the children, their problems."

Reception centre worker, ES

"Sometimes we deal with a police officer just bringing in a child, and he or she just doesn't have all the other information; then we will try to contact the prosecutor in charge, quite often on the phone, to discuss what we should do if someone calls, what we should do with somebody at the front door who knows the child, so that we have all the information. And quite often they say 'this is a matter related to a criminal charge or a criminal investigation, we can't give you this information'."

Reception centre worker, BE

"So there the guardian has all the information, and we don't have anything."

Reception centre worker, BE

The absence of a national data base and reference system that can be shared between agencies has been mentioned several times as a possible solution to problems with sharing information within and between countries.



Participants expressed frustration at not being able to identify the contact details of who they should liaise with, even in their own countries. For example,

“One of the other things that would be really helpful would be if there was a directory of these services across Europe...I just think that with Europe it should be a lot easier and there should be a directory [of services]; anyone should be able to call social welfare or the police or somebody.”

Law enforcement officer, UK

Third, the lack of a standardised approach within countries, in relation to prevention activities. It is not clear what is expected from each agency as in some countries there are no national strategies to state what each agency must do and who is responsible for what. This is reflected in the variation in the quality of service given to unaccompanied children by staff in reception centres and by carers and the varying attitude of police officers who may not prioritise unaccompanied children or take the risks they are exposed to seriously. For example,

“And when we’ve gone to the police to warn someone was ready to run away, because we knew they’d bought a bus ticket or someone had told us, what they say is: “well, it’s okay, don’t worry about it” and they didn’t do anything.”

Reception centre worker, ES



A few participants mentioned a wish for a dedicated missing person unit within national or regional police forces that would deal with missing person cases in their country. Such a unit will also specialise in unaccompanied children and will have trained staff that are aware of national patterns of migration and the specific needs of unaccompanied children. Such a unit would also act as a coordinator between agencies.

"I think we need procedures, shared working methods, shared by all actors working with unaccompanied children, especially with respect to sharing information. Someone should be in the position to be able to summon all actors involved to discuss better cooperation. We need to understand which authority should take this "coordination role". An ad hoc mechanism is not necessary, we would need to have a better network among services, maybe also with virtual tools. We miss the idea of sharing in this field."

Reception centre worker, IT

Fourth, lack of resources has been identified as a contributing factor to lack of cooperation. This is due to unmanageable workloads and a lack of ability to monitor and care for unaccompanied children at different times of day due to a lack of dedicated staff. For example,

"Excessive numbers of cases of unaccompanied children and few guardians."

Carer, EL

On the other hand, some participants made direct positive statements about positive experiences of cooperation. For example,

"Informative discussions with those who are responsible for children who want to leave."

Carer, EL

"Constant communication with organisations and services for the constant monitoring of the minors."

Social Worker, EL



More specific examples of good practice were:

First, police and social services visiting reception centres and meeting with unaccompanied children and talking to the staff.

"We call round to the centre and take photos and details, they will release the details to the media as soon as we give permission."

Social Worker, IR

"Communication for all the unaccompanied minors we have found or we have welcomed in the social services. Visit the minors in the reception centres where they stay. Need for a reference person both inside and outside of the reception centre."

Social Worker, EL

Second, information sharing practices between agencies leads to better prevention practices and follow up activities to prevent the unaccompanied child from going missing again.

"Sometimes they warn the guardian because they are worried about a child in the open shelter."

Reception centre worker, BE

"Supervision and workshops, information sharing about the progress of the minor."

Law enforcement officer, UK

"The presence of the police is positive. Actually we need to differentiate between local "carabinieri", who pass by to show themselves to the children, how they dress etc. They don't have a relationship with them. The Police, immigration office, have a more interesting role. They follow different steps of the asylum request and they create a direct connection with the child, from disembarkation onwards. We have a very good exchange of information with them, daily and positive."

Reception centre worker, IT

Third, active cooperation between agencies in the full sense assists in building a better understanding of the child, the circumstances of their travel and the risks they may be exposed to. For example,



“Co-ordinated planning and surveillance of unit when on-going concerns regarding young females potentially being trafficked for prostitution. Excellent sharing of information. Joint interviews with staff and young person.”

Social Worker, Ireland)

“When you have really good contact with the police, that they are really present, they can also speak to the people, inform them, because people are still afraid of the police. And we also have cases where the police come and talk with the child about trafficking, and also the mother or father who have come from France, and you can see it works.”

Reception centre worker, BE

“Whether it be a guardian, an advocate or a good foster carer, it’s about someone being trained and knowledgeable about these issues in order to be able to keep them safe. When a young person is referred

to us we then link them to an advocate in a very timely way. We then ensure that a safety plan is put around that young person to try to support them to not go missing or return to a risky place. We’ve done research and what we’ve found is that young people need foster care with fully trained carers that understand the needs of unaccompanied young people. They need good quality support, like supervising social workers. ”

NGO supporting LEA and social services when trafficked children, UK

Several participants from the UK referred positively to the National Referral Mechanism, a framework for identifying victims of human trafficking or modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support and to collect data about victims, contributing to building a clearer picture about the scope of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. It is coordinated by the National Crime Agency.³²

“We have National Crime Agency with us, now we are going to be linked-in with Immigration; we’ve had Immigration

³² For more information, see <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/about-us/what-we-do/specialist-capabilities/uk-human-trafficking-centre/national-referral-mechanism>



with us. It's crucial with children that are moving across borders that people work together..."

Social Worker, UK

"We do try to ensure that forces are working with social workers. We work very closely with the child trafficking advice centre who can provide advice to individual social workers whereas law enforcement who are working with these children make sure that they're responding appropriately and we do try to ensure that the police forces are working collaboratively with social workers."

Law enforcement officer, UK

3.2.6 Key findings in relation to prevention of disappearance of unaccompanied children

Collection of identifying information

- › The collection of detailed and exhaustive information on a child (including pictures) proves to be essential to ensure a proper follow up in case of disappearance. Biometrical information reportedly facilitate significantly the response of law enforcement agencies and child protection authorities to a case of a missing unaccompanied child.
- › Most successful practices are those which take time constraints into consideration, as many children tend to go missing within a few hours from their detection or placement in a care centre. For example, it is important that authorities deployed at known border points, such as airports and ports, are trained to be able to refer without delay the child to appropriate child protection services, which will then gather fuller information.
- › Quick and efficient collection of information is proven to benefit greatly from the use of standard forms and simplified administrative procedures.
- › Cooperation between services in cases of disappearance benefit from systems allowing easy storage and retrieval of information. Good practices reported are the creation of personal folders and the development of centralised systems to register information on unaccompanied children.
- › It is important to train personnel timely appointed, for example guardians, on how to collect and register relevant information on the child.



Assessing likelihood of unaccompanied child to go missing

- › This assessment is important to identify immediate reception and protection needs, also in terms of supervision. The actor in charge of this assessment should be clearly identified among the various stakeholders involved in the situation of an unaccompanied child.
- › Professionals suggest the development of national guidance and specific tools to improve the risk assessment process and standardise it. A standardised list of indicators could facilitate the process.
- › Behavioural patterns can be recognised in children with the same nationality. Nationality could therefore be an indicator of the likelihood that the child will go missing, but also of the existence of trafficking rings.
- › An assessment of the risk that the child is a victim of trafficking is essential in terms of preventing disappearance. Training the personnel in contact with the child, especially during the first moments, in identifying periodically updated indicators of trafficking could be beneficial.
- › Interpol and border authorities are not involved in this assessment, although many cases of disappearances may be linked with known migration patterns or international organised crime. 116 000 hotlines are also not involved in this assessment, despite the cross border nature of many of these cases.

Inform unaccompanied child about their rights, regulations and practices

- › The creation of a relationship of trust between the professional and the child is the most efficient measure to prevent the disappearance of the child.
- › Widespread suspicion and scepticism against authorities could be eased by providing

complete and understandable information on procedures and services available to the unaccompanied child, for example through child friendly communication, such as leaflets and videos. Videos are especially effective, because they show other young people talking about their experiences, in their language, and giving them simple clear messages about how to stay safe. It is also important to routinely engage with the child and provide updates about the process they are or will be subjected to and what it is likely to involve.

- › The involvement of linguistic and cultural mediators have proven to simplify communication and foster understanding and trust in the care provided.
- › It is important to inform the child on the risks of absconding on the child's safety and on the ongoing administrative procedures.

Collaboration with other agencies in prevention activities

- › Cooperation depends on knowledge and motivation of people involved, rather than strategic planning and procedures.
- › The creation of national databases and reference systems, with due regard for confidentiality of certain information and data protection, would simplify the implementation of the best care approach.
- › The creation of safety/care plans, triggered by a thorough assessment of the risk that the child will go missing and elaborated with other agencies, was found to be a very successful practice in several countries. These plans are developed by reception centres or foster families, together with guardians (or similarly qualified professionals) and can involve NGO's experts in certain issues, for example trafficking, to better tackle a certain situation.
- › Law enforcement agencies can play a key



role in the prevention of disappearances by providing information on migration paths, national and international patterns of trafficking and known criminal activity that could have an impact on the safety of the child.

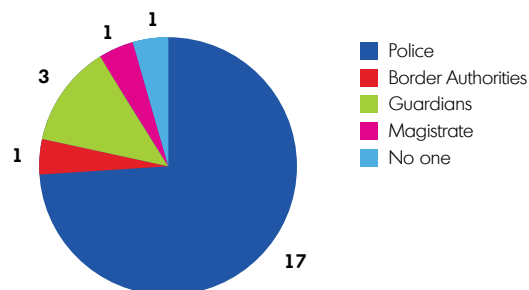


3.3 Responding to cases of missing unaccompanied children

3.3.1 Responsibility of a missing unaccompanied child

When an unaccompanied child goes missing the responsibility of managing the case is in the majority of cases with the police.

Figure 2– When an unaccompanied child goes missing, who is responsible for the case?



Several key challenges were however, pointed out by interviewees who highlighted their frustration at the lack of a clear ownership of a case involving an unaccompanied child, particularly when they go missing. For example,

“I was called the other day because he’d been caught stealing in a shop, the police called because I was the legal guardian, but I said it was for the juvenile judge, who said no, it’s not enough for me, I can’t place him in custody for stealing like 10 €. Then the police said I had to deal with it, but I said it’s not up to me, and the police just let him go. We see this sometimes because the police can’t do anything, the magistrate isn’t working with them. Then the police said, yes but he was already missing from this other centre, ok so we’ll close the file. I have no power to do anything as legal guardian. If the juvenile judge won’t do anything, take him in custody, that’s his decision. There’s something missing there. The boy was picked up the other day for

travelling without a ticket, and he was heading back to France. We know this.”

Guardian, BE

“If a child is missing and is picked up by the police, who is going to carry him back to the centre, the police say it’s not up to them to go and pick him up at the other side of Belgium. There’s no legal protocol about this, so they just let him go, or give him a ticket. There’s no structure to say ok you’re missing and we will bring you back to this centre. It’s a practical problem, who’ll take care of the transport; it’s a problem of money, authority, lack of personnel. And even if he is brought back, we know he’ll be off again in a couple of days. But we can give a signal to the minor that we’ll really take care of him. Otherwise, you just let him go, he doesn’t feel welcome.”

Guardian, BE



In some countries lack of clear ownership may result from assigning an organisation, rather than an individual, as a guardian. For example,

“Sometimes guardianship is given to organisations (e.g. residential care facilities). This does not comply with the child’s best interests. Normally, a guardian should be a person who has undertaken special education.”

Reception centre worker, ES

Interviewees also discussed a sense of bias towards unaccompanied children and lack of motivation by some professionals in various agencies to take ownership of the case and act in the child’s interest.

“Sometimes the local authorities don’t want to do anything. They just want to close the case, sometimes the police don’t want to do anything: they say it’s nothing to do with them.”

Social Services, UK

“So everybody’s just letting these kids go on the move and there’s lots of concern about the adults they’re with. But everybody just passes the buck.” (Social Services, UK)

This will be discussed in more depth in section 3.3.3.

We have also collected some examples of good practices in relation to responsibility vis-a-vis an unaccompanied child who goes missing.

First, it is important to acknowledge several examples of participants clearly stating what they do in response to the disappearance of an unaccompanied child and that they will take action as soon as possible.

“The moment we suspect that a child is missing, we report it, on the phone, to the police. I am, as director of the centre, the legal guardian. So I’m responsible. If I’m not at the centre, the educator who detects it gets in touch with me immediately to let me know and then we communicate with the police via phone.”

Reception centre worker, ES

Second, understand the system that should work to protect and locate an unaccompanied child once they are missing. Participants stated this very clearly:

“So that’s important: you need to know a little bit who is who in the network.”

Reception centre worker, BE

Third, carers, NGOs and 116 000 hotlines can act as an advocate for the unaccompanied children and put pressure on agencies to perform according to their statutory responsibilities and act quickly and investigate the child’s disappearance.



"Our role is to continually put pressure on and get them to understand their responsibilities and safeguard the concerns of this child. We come from the social worker side, the police role would be to ensure that a child missing is reported as a child at high risk, because sometimes if it's just put down as "not where they should be," it might be a lower threshold so we try to raise it to a higher threshold given the fact that the child is a foreign national child in a strange country, that they've gone missing from local authority care, so to kind of raise the threshold."

Social Services, UK

"When confronted with an increasing number of disappearances of unaccompanied children, we initiated a Memorandum of Understanding with all the relevant actors in the field: the police, the magistrate, the guardians, the immigration office, and the shelters. It doesn't work miracles, but it allows the different actors to understand each other's work, to see what information is crucial for the partners, and to speed up the exchange of information. It's our duty to continue to break through the indifference towards this group of children."

Child Focus, running the hotline for missing children in Belgium

"We have activated a protocol with the Police Head Quarters in Rome, the juvenile court, the administration of the municipality of Rome, the ombudsman for children and the University of Rome, in order to verify this flow. (...) The objective of this protocol was to create a managing booth at the Police of Rome, to create a monitoring system to study the phenomenon of missing unaccompanied children. We wanted to create a standard procedure, useful to collect and analyse information related to missing unaccompanied children. Then we wanted to develop a study on the reasons for going missing and to enhance the work of NGOs present on the territory to enhance the quality of care, and raise awareness among institutions about the disappearance of missing unaccompanied children. The proposal was developed together with Telefono Azzurro (i.e. the NGO running the hotline for missing children in Italy)."

Office of the Commissioner for Missing Persons, IT



3.3.2 Reporting of a missing unaccompanied child

Guardians and carers were asked how long they are likely to wait before they report an unaccompanied child missing. The majority of participants indicated they would report the case quickly.

Table 14 – How long after you noticed the disappearance of an unaccompanied child do you report it?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
As soon as the unaccompanied child is identified as 'missing'	9	1	0	2	0	1
Up to 12 hours after the report	1	0	2	1	3	1
Up to 48 hours after the report	2	1	0	2	2	1
Up to 72 hours after the report	0	1	0	0	4	1
Up to a week after the report	0	1	0	0	4	1
Up to a month after the report	0	0	0	0	5	1
Several months after the report	0	0	0	0	5	1
The case is not reported	0	0	0	0	4	2



However, several interviewees discussed delays in reporting of unaccompanied children. For example,

“One of the problems with asylum-seeking children is that there can be quite a delay between when they were last seen and when they’re actually reported missing to the police which makes it more difficult to try and locate them because some time has already passed and some of the things we might advise such as looking at closed-circuit television might not be available any longer depending on how long it’s taken for the child to be reported missing.”

Law enforcement officer, UK

“I would say that generally if they’ve come in and been placed in local authority care, or specialist foster care, I think we would generally get a report within five or six hours. It depends, if the child went out in the morning and doesn’t come back, or if he disappears at night we might generally get an earlier indication that he’s gone missing. We get a reasonably prompt report in most cases. More challenging are the cases when the child is with a private foster care arrangement and it may not be until the child is due for a meeting with the immigration officer and doesn’t attend, and that can be days if not weeks before notification to the police.”

Law enforcement officer, UK

“We have to wait until we are reasonably sure that the child is missing. If we try, for instance, to report it at 5pm, they’ll tell us: “well, it’s too soon, you have to wait” So we do it after midnight, when we already know that the child is not coming back. We give all the information about the child, name, age, etc.... and the following day, although it should be 24 hours after, we usually do it just the morning after, between 10 and 12, we do the written formal complaint with the police, with the complete information about the child, the description of what happened, all the details and then, the same morning, we communicate the disappearance to Child Protection Services, also on the phone, and we sent an Incident Report, where we communicate the disappearance, adding a copy of the police complaint and from that point there’s not much to do. We just wait to see if the child shows up. The case at the police is transferred to the minors’ unit and they usually get in touch with us one or two weeks after, to verify the information and to ask if we know anything about the child.”

Reception centre worker, ES

“In most of the cases there is a delay reporting to the police by the shelter/ reception centre where the child was staying.”

Hope for Children, running the hotline for missing children in Cyprus



This may be due to the variations in the meaning of 'missing' to different professionals and whether they consider the child is at risk when they have possibly disappeared or not. For example,

"For what concerns unaccompanied child cases, we still have to decide when these case are real disappearances or just children who are transiting and have other plans than to stay here"

Reception centre worker, IT

Some professionals working in reception centres mentioned that reporting could be delayed because it is a long and complicated procedure that may require them to physically go to the nearest police station, which could be a problem if the human resources working at the centre are limited in number.

"Rarely they [missing unaccompanied children] are reported. To "report" means that the responsible person needs to go to the closest police station and say "the minor who was put under care in my institute is not there anymore." They therefore, need to verbalise the information that then opens a file and an investigation, put information collected into their database etc. The "Communication" [simple information to the network of reception centres, done via fax] doesn't lead systematically to the opening of a file by the police. There are some communities that say that they can lose one entire day at the police station for every child that runs away."

Save the Children, IT

Another element that could delay the report of a disappearance is linked to the fact that in some countries financial support to the centre is provided on the basis of how many people are actually hosted there.

"What they [reception centres] normally do is the "communication" to local and national authorities. However, this is only a communication for administrative purposes, meant to stop the payment of the fee. Now we enter in a very particular topic, because what you may understand is that communication of the disappearance may be delayed to delay the moment when the money related to that guest is not paid anymore."

Save the Children, IT

On the other hand, it is also important to acknowledge that there are good practices and staff report a missing unaccompanied child as quickly as possible. For example,

"We immediately report the missing child to the local police, to the court."

NGO supporting LEA and social services when trafficked children, UK

"To the local network involved in managing migrant children."

Reception centre worker, ES



3.3.3. Activities when an unaccompanied child goes missing

Staff from 116 000 hotlines and guardians and carers were asked about their involvement in cases where an unaccompanied child goes missing. While guardians and carers seem to be involved, 116 000 hotlines' involvement in response to a missing unaccompanied child is less consistent.

Table 15 – In your country, how often are you professionally involved in responding to disappearances of unaccompanied children?

	116 000 Hotlines	Guardians and carers
Always	3	2
In most cases	1	7
Sometimes	3	2
Rarely	2	1
Never	1	1

77% of these groups of participants evaluated their involvement in such cases as valuable or very valuable.

Despite hotlines for missing children not often being involved, the large majority of respondents see their added value in these activities.

“Our involvement could be important for the dissemination of the child’s disappearance or for utilizing our networks in the local community to trace the child.”

Hope for Children, running the hotline for missing children in Cyprus

“We sometimes have information that other parties don’t have but which could be important to find the child. With the disappearance of a young non accompanied migrant minor (boy, 11) in Leuven, we would definitely have used a poster campaign in the city centre. Sometimes it takes too long before we are informed.”

Child Focus, running the hotline for missing children in Belgium.

“It would be important (to be involved) in all cases when the missing minor is a victim of traffic and/or exploitation and, more in general, organised crime.”

Telefono Azzurro, running the hotline for missing children in Italy

“It (the hotlines’ involvement) is very important as we activate the police in order to start the search for the child and we exchange with them useful information about the child.”

The Smile of the Child, running the hotline for missing children in Greece

Participants were asked to explain what actions they will take when an unaccompanied child goes missing. Most often, staff at reception centres and guardians will alert the police, register the disappearance in a database, analyse the risk and get in touch with friends of the unaccompanied child. They are not likely to contact 116 000 hotlines, despite those hotlines generally being alerted when a child goes missing. Hotlines are not alerted even when the disappearance is suspected to be transnational. According to the carers interviewed, hotlines are not called because carers are unaware of their expertise in missing



children and of the existence of an EU network of hotlines experienced in international cases. Some of the interviewed professionals did not understand the added value of involving these organisations in cases related to migrant children.

Table 16 – When an unaccompanied child disappears, what do you actually do?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
Alert Police	12	2	1	1	2	1
Alert Border	5	3	2	4	5	1
Alert the 116 000 Hotlines	1	1	0	4	6	0
Alert Interpol	2	3	2	3	8	1
Alert the competent Magistrate Authorities	1	0	0	0	0	0
Organise multi-agency case management meeting	3	3	4	0	1	1
Analyse the specific risks which the child could incur outside national care	7	2	1	0	1	1
Give publicity to the case	3	2	5	2	1	1
Register the disappearance in a database	10	0	0	1	1	1
Examine the risk of a cross-border component						
Get in touch with the family (if have contact details)	5	0	3	2	1	1
Get in touch with friends of the child (if have contact details)	7	1	3	1	3	1



Other activities include:

- Alerting Social Services
- Alerting the guardian
- Alerting staff at reception centres

Participants discussed in more detail bias exhibited by agencies in dealing with missing unaccompanied child cases. Participants were asked whether they register the following information when they register a disappearance of an unaccompanied child.

- Nationality
- Age
- Gender

Only five participants responded to this question and they all answered positively.

When asked if participants deal with missing unaccompanied child differently based on the following criteria they responded:

Table 18 – Do you deal with cases of unaccompanied children, who are missing, differently based on the following?

	Yes	No	I don't know
Age	10	7	3
Gender	4	10	3
Nationality	4	10	4
Being reported missing before	7	9	4

These results are interesting. In regard to the age of the child, interviewees elaborated on this and stated that the younger the child, the greater the concern is to their wellbeing and thus there will be a different response. For example,

“The younger the child, the greater the reflex to protect it. Under 13 it’s always a worrying case.”

Guardian, BE

“Gender does not make a difference, generally the younger the more work goes into the case.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK

“If a seventeen-year-old unaccompanied minor is brought to a reception centre, one of the bigger ones, and he disappears within the first twelve hours, then, quite often, they are sure that this is someone just passing on; they [staff] don’t phone the police, because they don’t think it’s worrying. But I think it’s important to monitor.”

Reception centre worker, BE



Taking language and cultural needs into account when dealing with the unaccompanied child is also important. For example,

“The background of the child is also relevant, there would be a different response for a child who has grown up in the area, speaks the language and has significant networks in the area, compared to a child who does not come from this country, does not necessarily speak the language, or have English as a first language, and would not have the same networks or connections. You would have to ask who might they be with and is that person safe for them to be with, which would be a different assessment for a child from a foreign background as opposed to a child who has grown up in Britain. We don’t provide specific guidance saying if the child is a foreign national you should treat them as high risk or whatever. It’s very much a question of deciding what is the capability of this child to be safe and what should we do to try and assist that.”

Law enforcement officer, UK

It is important to recognise and remember that good practices exist in parts of every country. This was identified by participants in this study. For example,

“They [the police] respond immediately and come along for traces that could be important for an investigation”

Guardian, IR

“When someone is placed in foster care, they phone the police and they say “Can you put a marker on my home, I’ve got a vulnerable child living with me and it’s possible they might go missing.” A serial number is then put on that address so that if someone then calls the police saying the child has disappeared, the police know immediately they have to act quickly because we’re talking about a really vulnerable child with a risk of going missing. We try to put this system in place with all the children we work with.” (NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK)

“Frequent communication, collaboration and supervision of both the guardian and the unaccompanied minor.”

Social Worker, EL



However, several key challenges were also discussed. The lack of consistency of procedures has been raised as a clear challenge in responding to unaccompanied children who go missing. For example,

“At the moment we’re looking at our procedures because at national level we’re not as consistent as we should be.”

Law enforcement officer, UK

The issue of criminalising the unaccompanied children is raised again as a challenge in how authorities are responding to these cases. For example,

“But when the children are found in criminal situations such as factories or are arrested for crime, they are treated as criminals before they are seen as victims. When they are bailed by the police they then go missing as no one has realised that they may be trafficked. ”

NGO supporting LEA and social services when trafficked children, UK

Finally, the lack of information as to how the case progresses or whether it has been resolved has been raised as a source of frustration by professionals. Several interviewees mentioned that they realised a child was found simply through contact with the child’s friend, rather than via official sources.

A suggested good practice to resolve the lack of consistency is to have a dedicated missing persons’ unit within police forces, regions and/or nationally. For example,

“If you have the youth police and if there’s a disappearance, it should always be the same team; it doesn’t have to be the same person, but the same team should be aware of where our centre is located; that we receive, on a daily basis, so and so many unaccompanied minors, which makes us an important partner for the police, and that this is a good thing.”

Reception centre worker, BE



3.3.4. Search activities of a missing unaccompanied child

Search activities are primarily carried out by the police. However, other agencies may also be involved in search activities:

- Volunteers
- 116 000 Hotlines
- Guardians and carers

Participants in the online surveys were asked how long after the reported disappearance of an unaccompanied child does a search start.

Table 19 – How long after the reported disappearance of an unaccompanied child does the search start?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
As soon as the disappearance is reported	10	6	0	0	0	5
Up to 12 hours after the report	0	1	1	2	1	5
Up to 48 hours after the report	0	0	1	2	2	5
Up to 72 hours after the report	0	0	1	0	3	5
Up to a week after the report	0	0	0	1	3	5
Up to a month after the report	0	0	0	0	4	5
Several months after the report	0	0	0	0	4	5
There is no search activity	0	0	1	0	4	5



When asked what activities will take place in a search for a missing unaccompanied child, participants indicated the following.

- Searching of their rooms
- Searching the local area
- Calling the unaccompanied child's phone number
- Talking to friends/peers/families
- Searching on social media websites

The above is NOT a comprehensive list of police search activities in a missing unaccompanied child case but only those activities specifically mentioned by participants in this study.

It is relevant to report that when asked how the police react to a reported disappearance of an unaccompanied child, often care services and hotlines for missing children were quite critical.

"We came to a very dramatic and drastic conclusion, which is that, to child protection services and to the police, when we have tried to alert them about these cases or said that a case of disappearance was about to happen, the feeling we've had is that the children don't matter. One less mouth to feed."

Reception centre, ES

"There is a lot of confusion about what procedures should happen but also there are, not a lot (...) A lot of the time a child doesn't present as a victim, sometimes people think oh well, it's no big deal, they know what they're doing, thinking they've got some autonomy about what they do; which obviously young people have, at the same time people should make an effort to try and safeguard them and protect them because they're not making informed decisions about what they're doing."

Social Worker, UK

"According to the law, the communication should happen when the child is not seen for 48 hours. Police are not informed when there is solely the communication. If there is the "report", and from information acquired law enforcement have reasons to believe that this is an arbitrary run away there is no investigation. If there are elements to believe that the child could be at risk of being trafficked or other (contacts with compatriots or Italians, a car parked in front of the centre for several days), investigation could start."

Save the Children, IT



“[Talking about the reaction of social services and law enforcement to a disappearance] It’s not always quite clear what their policies are, depending on which social services or which police team.”

Social Worker, UK

“[The minors Unit] usually gets in touch with us one or two weeks after, to verify the information and to ask if we know anything about the child. They usually make two or three more calls after that to see if we’ve had any news, and after that, they don’t call anymore. Many times we know something and we tell them, for instance we’ve had information that the child is in Denmark, but the process just stops there.”

Reception centre worker, ES

“So far, from the cases known by the missing children hotline in Cyprus, there was no positive result after an unaccompanied minor went missing. It is not clear what kind of investigation is done by the police, besides the publishing of a picture of the child, which is also done by our Hotline.”

Hope for Children, running the hotline for missing children in Cyprus

“They (missing unaccompanied children) will always be ‘flagged’ as missing and there will be a visit to the shelter to collect information and other basic tasks will be done, but things like tracking a phone, or going public with posters will rarely be done.”

Child Focus, running the hotline for missing children in Belgium

The different nationalities of the children was raised as a key factor in bias towards unaccompanied children who go missing. Most interviewees mentioned that directly as an issue for concern and cause of great frustration. For example,

“In the case of migrant minors, they are mainly runaways, not missing people. We have verified that many times, they arrive here but then we find them again in Norway, Finland. Italy is simply a bridge to join their communities in other countries.”

Law enforcement officer, IT

“When we have had young people go missing before, we have contacted the local police team. They have not seen it as a young person who has been trafficked and abducted. They have seen it as a young runaway and not prioritised it in a way that we would have hoped and expected them to do.”

Social Worker, UK

“What we see is mostly to do with the foreign national child, people don’t see... it’s a generalisation, people don’t give the same response. A lot of the time people might say, well that child WAS in our borough but he doesn’t come from our borough, he comes from somewhere else because there is a lot of confusion about what procedures should happen but also there are, not a lot, but there are people who might have racist views or discriminatory views about children and not do what they should do.”

Social Worker, UK



One of the police officers interviewed shared with us why, in his opinion, the response to the disappearance of an unaccompanied child could be limited.

"Most of the times, I think that when these children are reported missing, they have already left Belgium. Therefore, we have very poor elements on which to build an investigation. Mobile phone, bank card, internet..., these minors don't have connections here, on what can we investigate? In general, these cases are signalled to Interpol as a minor to be searched for. These cases are also complex because even when the police manage to intercept them, there is nothing after. Therefore, they will leave again for sure. The objective is not to stay in Belgium, mainly they want to go to UK. Therefore, as police, why invest energy, effort, to find a child, if we know that after that nothing happens, and that since the child is not detained, and is in an open centre, he will leave again. This feeling of working for nothing is not motivating. If we know that there is a follow up on the case, the child is assisted etc... but normally, they are just placed in a centre and then they leave again. Why waste our energy to look for the child if he will leave again. (...) The problem of unaccompanied children disappearing is a problem where there is no focus and no interest, at the level of justice, politics, media... no one is interested. Honestly, in our core business there are always more important cases than these. Therefore, our efforts will not be focused on this type of case, as well as our energy. This is something that is too abstract: There is no family here, we are not sure if the name is real, if the age is real... the work is too abstract to be efficient. This to be added to the fact that we have the feeling that there is nothing after. Once the child is found, 9/10 are the chances that he will leave again. This is a negative feeling:

If we look for a person that is suicidal, we know that after that is over there will be hospital, psychologist, family... if we find the person, there will be a follow up. With an unaccompanied child, we don't have this feeling."

Law enforcement officer, BE

Carers and staff at reception centres may conduct an informal search and not report the child missing to the police as they locate the unaccompanied child themselves. For example,

"What also happens is that when a child leaves, is missing, his room is checked and sometimes you find some phone numbers and we also report that to the police. So we do still play an active role, but it's not formal, we depend on information we find on Facebook, or in the room, or from some other boys or girls, but it's not official, we're not an official part of the process."

Reception centre worker, BE

"Sometimes we know that a child, for example, is not in the centre but is staying with a friend and has missed his train; we will really check, we will ask for the friend on the phone, ask for his address, talk to the friend and make an agreement and say: 'OK, you will have to come back to the centre tomorrow morning, and in that case we won't call the police'."

Reception centre worker, BE



3.3.5 Publicity appeals

Case

Azlan disappeared from the refugee shelter. The boy had been housed in the shelter ever since being intercepted by the police one month earlier. Azlan was transported by a ring of human smugglers. An investigation was opened into this smuggling and that was how the police found out that a new smuggling operation was in the works. Azlan – 11-years old – sorely missed his mother who was rumored to be heading to the United Kingdom.

The Smile of the Child, the missing children NGO in Greece, wished for Azlan to be reunited with his mother, but they did not wish for it to happen under these circumstances. The case officer immediately arranged for flyers to be distributed in rest areas along the highway to the Greek coast, known to be a smuggling route often used in those times. Simultaneously, she informed the magistrate responsible for the missing case, that a case on the initial smuggling had been opened in another district, and suggested that the two jurisdictions exchange information.

The flyer campaign paid off. Two days later, the police received a tip that enabled them to stop the human smugglers at a roadblock. Azlan was found inside a truck headed for the UK squeezed between cargo crates.

Azlan was given temporary accommodation in another shelter. But after only four days he ran away again. Flyers were again distributed but this time Azlan was not found. The Smile of the Child insisted that the judge contact the British police so that Azlan could be traced in the UK.

Thanks to these contacts, the NGO finally found out three months later that Azlan had arrived safely in London and was reunited with his mother.



Most participants (12/16) responded that they do publicity appeals for cases of missing unaccompanied children sometimes or rarely. Only four participants indicated publicity is done frequently when an unaccompanied child goes missing.

Consent is always sought in these cases. It seems that it is mostly up to law enforcement agencies, guardians or magistrates to give consent for publicity appeals when an unaccompanied child goes missing. In some countries it may be the prosecutor for minors.

Table 20 – In cases when the disappearance of an unaccompanied child is publicised, who gives consent?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Law Enforcement Agencies	8	3	0	1	1
Guardians	6	3	1	1	1
Reception Centres	2	3	1	0	4
Magistrate	5	0	0	0	4
Family members	2	1	0	4	3
We don't seek consent	0	0	0	0	7



Seven participants stated they thought publicity appeals were a good idea. A few participants raised concerns that there is bias against unaccompanied children in relation to publicity appeals. For example,

“Not enough people do enough when they do go missing. Controversial but it seems that people don’t really care, there is media attention and campaigns but when migrant children go missing there is nothing. Sometimes ignorance gets the better of them and they feign disinterest when really the child is usually at risk of exploitation.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK

The majority of operators from hotlines for missing children stated that publicity is a good idea in cases of missing unaccompanied children, given that every case needs to be considered on its own facts before taking this important initiative, always in agreement with the police and the magistrate.

“They are children, vulnerable and missing, they deserve as much publicity as any other child.”

Child Focus, running the hotline for missing children in Belgium

“Given that the child is a migrant unaccompanied minor, without any family and/or legal guardian in the country, it is considered being of high risk thus the decision of the publication of the minor is taken by the police.”

Hope for Children, running the hotline for missing children in Cyprus

“It depends on the case, on the information and whether we have the police approval or the prosecutor’s order.”

The Smile of the Child, running the hotline for missing children in Greece

“Missing People also uses our Support Partner Network of 400+ local agencies who provide a support or safeguarding role as an alternative to publicity –e.g. in cases where publicity would make a person more vulnerable. In these cases we can alert all or some of our Support Partners, send them info about the missing person and ask them to look out for them without publicising them/ putting poster up. If the person does access their service they can report the sighting to us or the police, and can provide effective support knowing they are missing (which could include referring them to our 116000 helpline)”

Missing People, running the hotline for missing children in UK

A special case is Italy, where publicity of disappearances of unaccompanied children is prohibited.

“It is forbidden to give publicity to the picture of an unaccompanied minor, especially asylum seekers. Their picture is circulated in the network of asylum authorities, but it is a closed network within law enforcement and other authorities. We cannot expose them to the public.”

Reception centre worker, IT



3.3.6 Cooperation with other agencies in response to a missing unaccompanied child

Participants were asked which agencies they cooperate with when an unaccompanied child goes missing. Police forces, reception centres, guardians and social services are the most likely partners to cooperate with, whereas, border authorities, Interpol, health services and the public are the least likely partners.

Table 21 – In cases when the disappearance of an unaccompanied child is publicised, who gives consent?

	Always	In most cases	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	I don't know
Other police forces	17	1	1	0	2	1
Border Authorities	1	2	6	3	4	2
Magistrate	2	0	3	0	3	1
Interpol	2	1	5	1	6	2
Reception centres	10	1	2	2	3	1
Guardians	8	2	5	1	6	2
116 000 Hotlines	3	0	7	4	4	0
Social Services	8	2	4	4	2	0
Health Services	0	2	6	2	6	1
NGOs	2	3	7	2	5	0
Public	2	1	6	2	6	1
Volunteers	2	0	3	6	5	1



A prosecutor for minors may also be liaised with in some countries.

Participants were asked whether they had written protocols with other agencies in dealing with the disappearances of unaccompanied children. In most cases, law enforcement agencies mostly had written protocols with other agencies. Care services have, in general, protocols of cooperation with law enforcement agencies and guardians, as well as with hotlines.

Table 22 – Do you have a written protocol of cooperation with [party] that includes collaboration in cases of disappearances of migrant children?

	116 000 Hotlines			Reception Centres			Law enforcement agencies			Guardians		
	Yes	No	IDK	Yes	No	IDK	Yes	No	IDK	Yes	No	IDK
116 000 Hotlines	1	1	1	2	6	0	7	2	1	0	7	0
Care Services	5	3	2	3	4	1	8	2	2	6	1	0

It is important to note that 116 000 hotlines for missing children also follow a cooperation procedure within their network, when they are asked to cooperate on a cross border case. Rules for cooperation address, among others, sharing of information, regular updates and procedures for decision making. When cooperating, hotlines are also required to inform Missing Children Europe, the coordinator of the network. Missing Children Europe ensures support when needed, respect of rules and conflict resolution.

Participants were asked whether they attend multi-agency meetings when an unaccompanied child goes missing. 15 of 23 responded that they are rarely or never invited to attend such meetings. Guardians and carers were sometimes invited (5).



The lack of cooperation between agencies has been discussed in depth in section 4.2.5 in relation to prevention activities. The same key challenges were identified in response to an unaccompanied child going missing.

A few participants discussed the good practice of frequent multi-agency meetings in relation to missing unaccompanied children. For example,

“There is every eight weeks, a consultation with all partners.”

Guardian, IR

In the UK, multi-agency meetings are expected to take place in cases of vulnerable children. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) operate across the UK, and the hub is a core group of professionals work collaboratively. The core group tends to include the police and Children’s Services safeguarding leads, alongside representatives from Probation and the Youth Offending Service, and in many cases Health and Mental Health practitioners.

The core group usually has access to many other services and agencies that might be able to paint a more detailed picture of that individual’s criminal, social and family history. Sometimes specialist workers may be brought in to tackle an area of concern for a local place.³³

“Across the UK some forces already have them [MASH] in place, others are in the process of establishing them with their partners. They vary in structure, a lot of them are a form of cooperation between the police and social workers located in one location to share information and improve practice in general towards missing children and broader issues. What I haven’t examined is how this feeds into the issues around asylum seeking and how those are engaged around this process. I don’t know what impact it’s having but I certainly expect there will be a positive impact but we’re still implementing this across the UK”

Law enforcement officer, UK

“The hubs, they call them MASH, they are not in all country, there is one in London and some in the surrounding areas. They are not at their best practise. You can have many members in the hub, like charities and the education sector. They are located in the same office, they use their own IT systems, so when some information comes in about any child, they can work quickly as they are together.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK



Even if it was not envisioned to investigate in this study the matter of cross border cooperation in cases of missing unaccompanied children, the topic was raised by carers. A lot of frustration was expressed in relation to this aspect of their work.

“We cannot work with the authorities of other countries, and this is Europe. We know that children are going to these countries but we never have the proof that they arrived. As legal guardian, if we could just get a call to say the child has arrived, it would be ok.”

Guardian, BE

Cooperation with authorities and carers in other countries seems to be extremely difficult for two main reasons. First, lack of communication and procedures for information sharing between child protection authorities and carers. Second, a lack of motivation to follow up the case.

“Communication can be improved with political will, as well as procedures. We heard at a conference in December someone from Interpol say that if they were told of a disappearance they can share this with other countries in the database and if he’s found it will go on the database. The problem is no one uses it so there are some tools but people aren’t aware of them, or they take too long and people aren’t motivated. Sometimes a child who disappears is seen as one less problem to be taken care of. Everyone in every country tells me the same, there is a lack of communication.”

Guardian, BE

“There can often be frustrating delays around cross-border cooperation. Sometimes countries hide behind the bureaucracy and need formal notification before they do anything and this takes time to make sure everything is completed correctly, and it means you’re losing information and the opportunity to potentially locate the child. I’m certainly aware of frustration about the speed with which some countries respond.”

Law enforcement officer, UK



“It is almost by chance that we find the administration or centre to contact. This is the dream! EASO could play an important role here, they are working on family reunification and they want to create a certain network. This is key for the future.”

Law enforcement officer, BE

In Belgium, where the hotline for missing children is quite involved in the discussions around the protection of unaccompanied children, their added value has been recognised by carers.

“Child Focus is involved, but the helpline isn’t involved in all countries, that’s a pity. They have a role to play, they can help the guardian. 116 000 has a network all over Europe so if there is a disappearance they know about who they can contact in the network to see if there’s any news of the child.”

Guardian, BE

3.3.7 Key findings in relation to response to the disappearance of unaccompanied children

Responsibility of a missing unaccompanied child

- › A clear and well-understood division of tasks between each party involved is crucial to ensure an appropriate reaction to the disappearance of an unaccompanied child and consistency of service.
- › It is important to provide training on “missing” for all professionals working with unaccompanied migrant children.
- › Hotlines for missing children usually play an important role when a child disappears, especially in cross border cases, but this does not often happen when the child is an unaccompanied migrant.

Reporting of a missing unaccompanied child

- › Quick reporting of missing unaccompanied child cases to the police is crucial but often hindered by lengthy reporting procedures, lack of human resources in reception centres and frustration due to an inappropriate follow up to the case by police.
- › Some suggested that swift procedures to report disappearances of unaccompanied children (by phone or email) could facilitate reporting. However, this would require that the collection of information related to the unaccompanied child is already centralised, to allow a faster decision making process on the most appropriate response to the disappearance of the child.
- › Funding for a reception centre should not depend on the number of children hosted.

Missing children are usually reported to hotlines for missing children, while this is not the case

³³ For more information about this practice see (Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing, 2014) <http://informationsharing.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/P0075-MASH-briefing.pdf> and (Home Office, 2014) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/338875/MASH.pdf.



when the missing child is an unaccompanied minor. Hotlines could play an active role in the follow up of the case, as they do in other cases, if the disappearance is reported to them.

Activities when an unaccompanied child goes missing

- › The disappearance of an unaccompanied child is not prioritised and is not given the same urgency and care that would be provided for citizens.
- › The assumption that an unaccompanied child left the reception centre or the foster family out of his or her own free will is often automatic and leads to a delay or a lack of follow up. The assessment of the reason behind the disappearance is often hasty, which hinders the safety of the child. Providing appropriate training on missing children to law enforcement and care professionals is once again crucial.
- › Responses and approaches differ substantially not only from country to country, but also among interviewees from the same country, causing a lot of frustration and suggesting once again that the type of response depends on the motivation and skills of the people involved, and the procedures for efficient cooperation are generally lacking.

Search activities of a missing unaccompanied child

- › Search activities seem to be conducted in most cases, but law enforcement complains about the limited amount of information available in the majority of these missing cases, leading to a limited response. However, carers witness that investigations are sometimes rushed even in case when elements for further investigation are available.
- › Centralised administration of information is suggested again as a way to enhance the quality of the investigation, as it would reduce

the time needed to get access to information and ensure that every element is accessible in one place. Cooperation with the police on the development of these tools would improve their quality and usability by law enforcement.

Publicity appeals

- › Publicity of cases of missing unaccompanied children is not done frequently and in some cases it is forbidden.
- › An option could be to inform professionals rather than public about a missing person if publicity is not appropriate.

Cooperation with other agencies in response to a missing unaccompanied child

- › Hotlines for missing children can be a key player in bringing together all stakeholders that could have a role in providing the best response to a disappearance of an unaccompanied child. Particularly useful proved to be the knowledge of the matter of disappearance, the already established cooperation with law enforcement agencies and other actors (e.g. magistrates, social services) and the experience in development of multilateral protocols. The involvement of hotlines in improving response to missing unaccompanied children would however require additional resources.
- › Progress in child protection and quality of response was reported in those countries where stakeholders developed a multi-agency protocol of cooperation concerning the response to disappearances of unaccompanied children. Multi-agency protocols have proven very useful to clarify division of tasks and competences, to improve information sharing between agencies and to develop care plans and safeguarding actions. Periodical review of the cooperation agreement is recommended.
- › The creation of multi-agency hubs involving



police, children's services and anti-trafficking experts to support the work of grassroots professionals has proven to improve substantially cooperation between services, especially in terms of information sharing, data collection and research.

- › Cross border cooperation in missing unaccompanied children cases between care institutions, law enforcement agencies and networks for missing children seems to be almost non-existent. Carers are often following up independently because they are concerned for the safety of the child, through social media or known acquaintances of the child. Several carers suggested that it would be useful to develop tools for quick cross border exchange of information on a missing unaccompanied child, for example an international database accessible to child protection authorities.
- › Despite expertise in cross-border cases of missing children and the well-established internal cooperation procedures, the European network of hotlines for missing children is not often consulted or involved.



3.4 After care of unaccompanied child once they are found

Case

A child of 16 from Algeria came to Belgium from France, where he had been living for four months. He arrived in Antwerp alone. He was living on the street, trying to survive. At a certain point he reached out to an organisation for help.

It was decided that the boy should live in a reception centre where he could have food and shelter. After three days, he asked to talk with the director. He did not want to stay. He made some friends in Antwerp and he wanted to go back to them. The director, who could not force him to stay, could only give him a train ticket. In the meantime, a guardian had already been appointed. The first thing he asked, was why he had left the centre. The boy laughed. It was in a forest! There was nothing to do there for a street boy who has lived in Paris or Antwerp. The place was three or four miles away from the closest town... he felt lost.

It was not the best choice to place him there. A more thorough assessment of his needs and more attention when considering his past would have been important to take a better decision for his future.

- **They register in other countries and go to authorities**

In some cases, children leave voluntarily with the goal to reach another country, where their relatives live, or a known community is well-established, or where they believe chances to be granted international protection would be higher or care systems would be better. Different care protection standards and criteria to grant international protection are among the main reasons pulling a child to leave to another country. The identification of these children is difficult: they do not often carry identification documents because they are afraid they will be sent back to the country where they were staying earlier. For the same reason, they tend to give a new name when registering. Identification is also difficult because in many cases fingerprints are not collected, especially when children are younger than 14 years old. It is difficult in these cases to cross check the identities of a child that is missing in one country and the child that is registering in another.

"It is very important to collect as soon as possible biometrical data, to be able to share that later. Without that we could never match the child if he appears somewhere else."

Law enforcement officer, BE

3.4.1 Circumstances of being found

It has been recognised repeatedly in previous publications, and confirmed by the professionals surveyed in the framework of this study, that unaccompanied children who go missing from a certain centre are rarely traced, despite in some cases they may be under the child protection system of another country. However, when contact is re-established with the child, it is likely to be a result of the following:

- **Call their legal guardian/reception centre**

As a result of the development of a good relationship and trust between the care giver and the child, children may decide to inform the guardian or some carers of their whereabouts. Children could be in need of help or just willing to reassure carers of their safety. Guardians and carers tend to inform the police about the place where the child is but may refrain to do so if the child is in another country and they



are afraid that this could cause the child to be transferred back, against his or her will. We have also collected testimonies of carers that have tried to follow up on the situation of a child in another country especially if the care giver thinks that the child is in danger. However, we have also been advised that follow up has often been quite complicated as there is confusion on the correct procedures to follow and the correct foreign authorities or professionals to get in touch with. Personal connections are reported to be often used due to the lack of formal procedures.

“We cannot work with the authorities of other countries, and this is Europe. We know that children are going to these countries but we never have the proof that they arrived. As legal guardian, if we could just get a call to say the child has arrived, it would be ok.”

Guardian, BE³⁴

- **Peers/friends inform of where they are**

For the same reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph, a child might decide to inform peers of their whereabouts. As we have seen above, sometimes a concerned care giver may ask to the peers to get in touch with the child (through mobile phone or social media) to make sure that he or she is safe. However, they may refrain from informing the police if the child is reported to be in another country and prefer to use personal connections in the country where the child is (if any) to make sure that he or she stays safe and receives the support needed.

“If the child is living in a group, the peers are important. Quite often, if the child goes missing no adult will know about it, but the roommate, or other people with whom they live will know. If the child goes missing, we will bring together the group and we will

ask “if he or she gets in touch, you should tell us that, or you could ask if you can pass the phone to an educator.”

Reception centre worker, BE

- **Return by themselves**

Unaccompanied children tend not to trust or tend to be afraid of authorities in the country where they are. For this reason, in some cases they prefer to go back to the care giver that they feel they can trust. We have been advised that there are two main reasons that may be behind the decision of a child to go back to the place that was giving him or her shelter. One is the case of a child who was abducted to join a trafficking ring or a gang organising forced labour or sexual exploitation, and who escapes. In other cases, the child disagreed with the plan developed for him by carer givers, mainly educational, and subsequently realised that it is too dangerous to be on their own.

“There is a difference between the needs that they perceive and their real needs. They want to work, earn money, but I am their educator and I know that they need to learn the language, go to school, grow up as a person, integrate with the community and then go to work. We explain to them the importance of all this. (...) They are teenagers, asylum seekers, migrants: you need to put together their multiple vulnerabilities. This is why it is so important to build a trusting relationship, and this is also important when they come back.”

Reception centre worker, IT

³⁴ The same quote was also used in Ch. 3.3.6.



- **Police or other law enforcement agency find them**

It is important to mention that, in several countries, when the child is found by law enforcement officials within the borders of the same country where he or she was missing, unclear rules on how to proceed may increase the risks to which the child is exposed. A worrying practice reported from carers in Belgium and in Spain is that a found child is often just given the bus or train ticket to go back alone to the centre where he was hosted before.

Many carers complain about not receiving information when the case is closed or archived. Persistent requests sometimes result in the decision of the police to inform the professional of the outcome of the investigation, but this is not always the case.

3.4.2 Needs of unaccompanied child when they are found

Participants were asked to identify the needs of unaccompanied children who are found following going missing. These included

- The need to identify who is responsible for them
- Physical/medical needs
 - › Identifying whether they have injuries
 - › Identifying whether they suffered from abuse
 - › Identifying whether they are malnourished
 - › Identifying whether they suffer from addiction
- Psychological needs
 - › Identifying whether they suffered trauma
 - › Identifying whether they suffer from PTSD, depression, etc.
 - › Considering whether they are being listened to
 - › Receiving information about what will happen to them
 - › Ensuring that they are put in a nurturing environment
 - › Enabling them to be able to trust someone
- Life skills- education, routine, learning local language, knowing who to trust
 - › Education
 - › Establishing routines



- > Learning local language
- > Getting involved in activities at shelters reception centres
- > Getting involved with the local community
- > Possible change of placement
- > Legal assistance

An area that was highlighted by several participants was that unaccompanied children who are trafficked by criminal organisations are sometimes treated as criminals rather than victims.

“He was so scared to be found in that environment again (cannabis farm), he was afraid of the potential of him being criminalised. There were no adults found in that environment, so there were no adults to prosecute. So the need for a nurturing family environment with people who understand what he’d experienced and being really vigilant about his safety are essential. There is a huge risk of him going missing again, particularly because he is going to be criminalised. He’s going to want to remove himself from the situation. He hasn’t done anything wrong, he was forced to do that, and yet he may be looking at a two-year prison sentence. It’s about giving them back their childhood by enabling them to create a supportive network, have some education, get them to know what they want to do with their life, and just to be able to rebuild. It’s also the time to take a step back and start dealing with the trauma.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK

3.4.3 Interviews when an unaccompanied child is found

While the needs of unaccompanied children are acknowledged, there seems to be relatively little aftercare activities by the agencies involved in the care of unaccompanied children. Some participants indicated they will talk to the unaccompanied children but in an informal manner. For example,

“Not in an official interview, as with us, round the table; but maybe they will do the dishes together, and we will have a conversation about it.”

Reception centre worker, BE

“The little I know is through the kids themselves. I asked them a lot of things, I am always on top of them: “where are you going?”, “how are things over there?”, “how does it work?” ... But official information, we don’t have it.”

Reception centre, ES

Previous studies recognise the importance of conducting a detailed return interview when a person has been found following going missing. In some countries, this is a statutory requirement or routine activity in the case of any missing child.

Participants clarified the three main aims of such interviews as:

- To establish the reasons why the unaccompanied child went missing;
- To understand what the unaccompanied child experienced while missing; and
- To determine possible future risks to the unaccompanied child.

When asked whether unaccompanied



children are interviewed when they are found, 17 participants responded and of those only eight participants stated that an interview will always or in most cases will take place.

It seems that when interviews are conducted, they are carried out by

- Law enforcement agencies (4)
- Reception centre staff and guardians (4)
- Social services (4)
- Prosecutor for minors (1)

Participants discussed the advantages of conducting an interview. For example,

“The interview is recorded and the child is told that it will go in a database, they are usually very open. Youth workers are good at engaging and they have no power over the child’s life, the child shares a lot more in the way of personal information, sometimes they withhold info but mostly it is true, it is put in system to use in risk assessment. ”

It is not clear whether information gathered from these interviews is stored anywhere as only two participants responded that it is. However, there is some indication that information is shared between the following agencies:

- Police (5)
- Reception centre (7)
- Guardians (1)
- 116 000 hotlines (2)
- Social services (4)
- Health services (2)
- NGOs (5)

It is worth noting that participants indicated they do not share this information with Interpol

and border authorities. While in some cases this is appropriate practice, it is worth considering that information gathered from these interviews can be informative and provide intelligence that these agencies may benefit from.

It is also interesting to mention that UK guidance for return interviews for children, from the Governmental Department for Education, states that they should be done by an independent professional, rather than someone directly involved in their care. NGOs are able to build up trust with a young person as separate from the statutory system, and can have a more confidential discussion³⁵.

³⁵ Statutory guidance. Children who run away or go missing from home or care. (UK Department for Education, Jan.2014)



3.4.4 Key challenges

First, the unaccompanied child may not cooperate or reveal any information about why they went missing or what happened to them while they were missing.

“Young people do not often disclose much and will often not say where they’ve been, where they’ve gone – it would be hard to get any information about them, as to where they’ve been. I think perhaps it should not be a one-off event but a series of questions that can be answered over a few months to explore that issue. You’re not going to get anything at one meeting. Just keeping some questions on the backburner to bring up again and explore or again continue to talk about safety planning for the future. A lot of our young people wouldn’t necessarily disclose where they’ve been and what happened during that episode.”

Social worker, UK

Second, despite responses above that information sharing takes place, several participants commented on lack of cooperation between agencies, in this regard.

“If we conduct the interview, we will share the information with social carers and the police but if they do them they often don’t share the information with us. Information sharing in lots of cases is quite poor. It’s top of the list of things we need to get better at. I think a lot of people are afraid of sharing the information: “Am I breaching the Data Protection Act?” “Should I not be sharing this information?” “What can I share?” so they don’t share anything.”

NGO supporting LEA and social services with trafficked children, UK

Third, is inconsistency of practices, where in some areas unaccompanied children will be interviewed while in other areas they will not.

“Once again the provisions are not consistent across the country, some forces do have it and it’s working well, other forces don’t have a third party and it will depend on the nature of the case who does the return interview, quite often it’s done by police officers if at all.”

Law enforcement officer, UK



3.4.5 Examples of good practices

First, multi-agency work should continue when a child is found and lead to further discussions regarding safeguarding actions and an updated care plan. For example,

"If they were found, we'd probably have a strategy meeting with the police, with social services to talk about how we can better support this young person so that they don't go missing again. We'd do more risk assessments to make sure that this time we feel they ARE in a better situation in London at a lesser risk of going missing but also have a discussion with the young person – that's what a lot of the work would be – exploring the issue with the young person, asking them about what happened or what they think could make them safer in future."

Social Worker, UK

Second, information sharing can be improved by having one database that is shared by all agencies involved with the care and aftercare of the unaccompanied child.

"Put the [information], in the same database, accessible to all agencies- only one password."

Child protection authority, BE

It was also recognised that the school system and teachers need to be informed about the children they are responsible for during school hours.

"If they go to school, go missing and go back to school, you can't give all the information to the school, because we can't pass information to the school; but, with those things that we can say and explain to them, we do."

Reception centre worker, BE

Third, when gathering information from the unaccompanied children as they return and assessing their risk, it may be possible to gather intelligence and establish whether there is also a risk to other children living with them. For example,

"Also, we have to monitor the risk for the other children: we had a girl, when there was a really active network trying to get the girl back, and then you know that there is a risk for the other girls as well."

Reception centre worker, BE



3.4.6 Key findings in relation to aftercare

Circumstances of being found

- › Participants confirm once again that the majority of unaccompanied children who went missing are never found. When children who have moved to another country establish a contact with professionals or peers that have gained their trust, this may not be reported to the authorities. This usually happens when the child moved to reunite with family outside official procedures or because child protection standards are higher in the country of destination.
- › It is reported to be difficult to obtain information from law enforcement on the outcome of the investigation on the disappearance of an unaccompanied child. This behaviour demotivates cooperation between law enforcement agencies and care professionals.

Needs of unaccompanied children when they are found

- › Systematic assessment of the needs of a previously missing unaccompanied child is rarely conducted and we have not been able to identify the existence of structured official procedures in the countries that we studied, despite the importance of this step.
- › Unaccompanied children found in specific contexts that suggest that they have been engaged in criminal activity, are not always considered victims. This has negative consequences on the well-being of the child.

Interviews when an unaccompanied child is found

- › A thorough interview with trained professional is considered the most successful tool to collect the necessary information for the development of an appropriate care plan

for the child. It needs to be followed up with tailored support based on child's needs – e.g. independent advocate.

- › Cooperation between carers and law enforcement on the case of a found child is very important, as information gathered from interviews could be a source of intelligence in combating criminal organisations.



3.5 Training

3.5.1 Training received by staff

Participants in the online surveys were asked whether they received any training in prevention, response to and aftercare of unaccompanied children who went missing. The majority of participants stated they did not receive such training.

Table 23 – Did you receive any training in relation to unaccompanied children, specifically on prevention/response/aftercare?

	Yes	No	I don't know
Prevention			
116 000 Hotlines	4	4	2
Guardians and carers	4	13	1
Law enforcement agencies	0	4	0
Response			
116 000 Hotlines	6	4	1
Guardians and carers	2	15	1
Law enforcement agencies	0	4	0
Aftercare			
116 000 Hotlines	5	4	1
Guardians and carers	8	10	0
Law enforcement agencies	1	4	0

Participants in the online surveys and interviews were in favour of receiving further training and emphasised that training should also be offered to other professionals working with unaccompanied children, such as:

- Volunteer guardians
- Social workers
- Police officers
- Teachers
- Health care professionals

Training has been run, in some countries, by 116 000 hotlines, NGOs and migration authorities as well as by police officers.

3.5.2 Training needs

The following areas were identified as a priority for future training programs:

Procedural information

- Information regarding the roles of authorities and agencies involved in the care of unaccompanied child. This includes information about who is responsible for an unaccompanied child, contact lists both within the country and across the EU
- Information about child protection and welfare services available
- Understanding of push and pull factors that lead to unaccompanied children going missing
- Information about aftercare needs of unaccompanied children who are found after going missing
- Good practice in handling cases of unaccompanied children who go missing, i.e. examples of circumstances of children being found and understanding their needs



- Good practice in handling cross border cases
- Interview techniques
- Best interest of the child determination
- Information about child trafficking
- How to identify signs of risk to the unaccompanied child
- Information about the process of age assessment and what it involves
- Update on current legislation

Pastoral care information

- Information about unaccompanied children, their needs, patterns of movement in the specific country and across the EU
- Cultural characteristics of unaccompanied children that is specific to their country of origin
- Improving empathy and positive attitude by professionals
- Counselling techniques
- Information about cultural mediation



Conclusions

The research aimed to identify good practices and key challenges in inter-agency cooperation in the prevention of, and response to, vulnerable unaccompanied children who go missing from reception centres and other types of care. It focussed on four areas, namely the prevention of disappearances; the response to disappearances; the after care of an unaccompanied child who returned or was found after disappearing; and training.

Seven key countries took part in the study: Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. Given that the sample is fairly small, based on 41 online surveys and 17 interviews, it is not possible to draw general conclusions about practices across the EU. However, given that the report reflects insights from both the actors which primarily deal with the reception of unaccompanied children and those which focus on disappearances of children, it serves as a useful mapping exercise which can be used, with the guidance manual, to promote discussions and expert workshops between these actors across Member States. Such exchange should form the basis for enhanced cooperation between them, with a view to better safeguarding of children who are in a very vulnerable situation.

Indeed, the study findings strongly suggest that reinforced efforts should be devoted to developing and delivering training programmes on the matter of the disappearance and protection of unaccompanied children to frontline workers. This is particularly urgent today, when the growing number of unaccompanied children arriving in Europe has required public and private organisations to hire a large number of staff, often with very little or no experience in the specific protection demands of this group of children and their vulnerability (to risk).

This training and ongoing cooperation between parties should also be supported by research which takes into account the children's point of view, recording their experiences and identifying their concerns and needs when they arrive in a new country unaccompanied by an adult, is also necessary.

In addition, ongoing research on the risks (including risks of trafficking) to which unaccompanied children are exposed is also necessary to better prevent and respond to disappearances, as these risks may lead to or be the reason for going missing. Research should include not only the direct experience of carers, but also intelligence gathered by law enforcement, including European and International agencies, as was done in this study.

It is also clear from the report that an early and thorough risk assessment is a very important task which carers need to undertake together when deciding on the care plan for the unaccompanied child and which could trigger a faster and more appropriate response from law enforcement in the case of a child going missing.

Finally, while this study aimed mainly at researching on collaboration between services within a country, professionals often mentioned the challenges related to cross border cooperation which arise in cases of missing unaccompanied children. This matter should also be urgently addressed by specific research and projects highlighting gaps in current legislation and cross border arrangements, opportunities offered by existing tools, and new tools, to cover areas where cooperation is currently inefficient.



Glossary & acronyms

CONNECT	Identifying good practices in, and improving, the connections between actors involved in reception, protection and integration of unaccompanied children in Europe
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EUROPOL	European Union's law enforcement agency
FRONTEX	European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union
IMPACT	Improving Monitoring and Protection Systems Against Child Trafficking and Exploitation
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KMOP	Family and Childcare Centre
LEA	Law Enforcement
MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
PSTD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNCRC or CRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



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