

CHILDREN ON THE RUN

Experiences of unaccompanied minors
leaving shelters in Greece



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years in Greece, there has been a high rate of unaccompanied minors absconding from shelters where they suddenly, with or without notice, leave on their own accord. Data from the Greek authorities show that in the years 2012 to 2016 between 13 and 33 % of unaccompanied minors absconded within the first 24 hours of arriving to a shelter. Despite high rates of absconding, little is known about this phenomenon and the unaccompanied minors' own experiences of leaving shelters in Greece.

The present study explores the motivation and experiences that unaccompanied minors have absconding from shelters. Moreover, the study explores how care-givers experience absconding and what procedures shelters have in place to support children to stay in care facilities.

The data for this study was collected between February and April of 2017 in Athens, Greece. The study used a qualitative research methodology and employed semi-structured interviews and art to explore unaccompanied minors' and care-givers' experiences related to absconding. In total, 9 unaccompanied minors from 5 different shelters were interviewed. Each child was interviewed about his motivation and experience absconding from a shelter in Greece. In addition, 8 staff from 4 shelters were interviewed about their experience related to unaccompanied minors leaving care facilities and about what measures are, and can be, taken to prevent absconding.

The unaccompanied minor participants reported push as well as pull factors for absconding. It was found that the most reported reason for absconding from shelters was the longing to travel to another European country, either because the participant had relatives there, or did not find perspectives in staying in Greece. Moreover, it was found that delays in asylum, family reunification and relocation procedures was an important motive for absconding, where minors would rather take matters into their own hands.

The participants reported that lack in quality and services in the shelter was related to absconding. Furthermore, the lack of social cohesion and relationships to other residents and staff in the shelter was also linked to absconding. This was especially the case for minors that were alone from their country or language group, which led to feelings of isolation in the shelters, which was further amplified if there was a lack of available interpretation services. It was found that when a cultural mediator or an interpreter could offer support it may help to enhance the minor's well-being and reduce stress and helplessness deriving from not being understood.

The staff participants from the shelters expressed difficulties in providing an alternative solution to absconding when the children were determined to leave the shelter to go to another country. The importance of the minors being introduced to the shelters' routines, staff and other minors was also mentioned as a crucial factor for the minors quickly feeling at home, which helped take care of their immediate needs. It was mentioned that minors felt pressure from relatives in their home country to leave the shelters and continue their journey. Also, the minors expressed to the caregivers that the long waiting periods for asylum procedures to go through were making them leave the shelter and the lack of future perspective made them hopeless. The correlations between the pressure from relatives, delays in procedures, and lack of future perspectives were central for absconding.

There are several steps that need to be taken to support unaccompanied minors in shelters and to help prevent absconding. Additionally, there are structural changes related to policies and practices which may lead to absconding and which should be addressed to protect children and to promote the best interest of the child.

Recommendations for shelters

To have procedures in place on welcoming and introducing new-comers to the shelter, applicable at all times, regardless of the time of the intake, which can be ensured by familiarizing all staff – even the night shift – on the said procedures. It is essential to arrange interpretation services to support in the induction process and to have the procedures and rules of the shelter clearly explained.

– To ensure that minimum standards are met and that basic needs are covered including: food, clothes, psychosocial support, legal aid, recreational activities and access to education and healthcare.

– To introduce newcomers to the other children living in the shelter as well as care-givers during the first hours of arrival.

– To provide age-differentiated activities and rules within the shelter.

– To provide children with daily routines and activities that will create resilience and support their psychological well-being and engagement in the shelter.

– To inform children about the process for legal appointments and family reunification or relocation procedures.

– To assign a focal point or mentor to each child to ensure close follow up and to create a strong support system around them.

– To ensure that all members of staff are aware and trained on issues of absconding.

– To address absconding and to implement sessions that inform minors of the risks of human trafficking and smuggling.

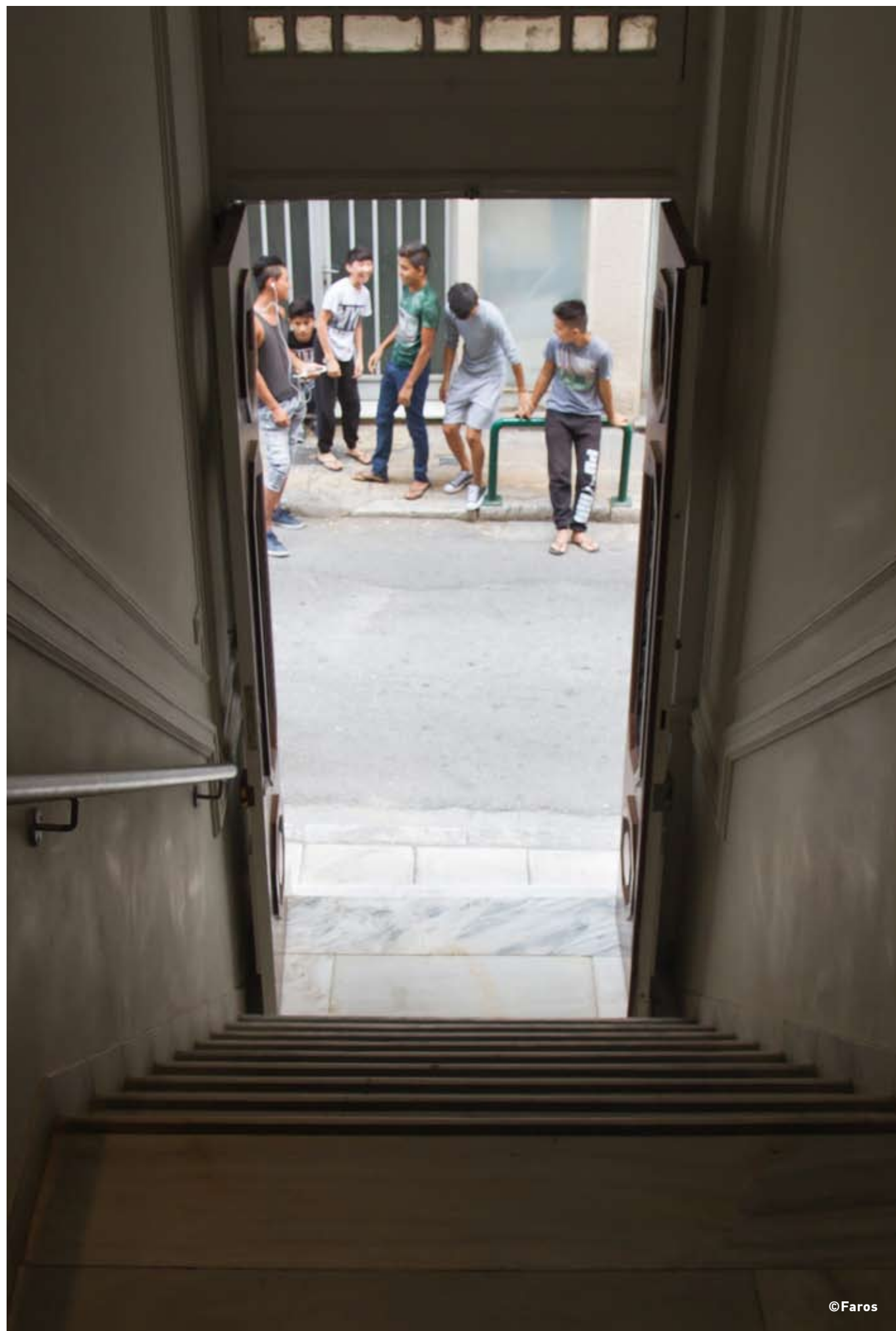
Recommendations for the Greek authorities and EU member states

– To provide durable lawful solutions for unaccompanied children in Greece that would present a viable option other than absconding, including integration procedures for asylum applicants in Greece, family reunification and even alternatives such as relocation.

– To ensure faster family reunification procedures, to the very least respecting the 6-month limit dictated by the Dublin Regulation but with even lower time-framework goals, as well as to ensure that other ad hoc alternatives, such as relocation, are following the same time-efficient logic for all vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors.

– To ensure faster family reunification and relocation procedures for vulnerable groups including unaccompanied minors.

– To provide reliable information to unaccompanied minors on the process of their asylum claims as well as family reunification and relocation applications.



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Migration of unaccompanied minors to Greece

In recent years Greece has become one of the main points of entry into the European Union for migrants and refugees including unaccompanied minors¹. Since 2000 the number of unaccompanied minors reaching Greece has steadily increased. Between 2008 and 2013 an average of 11.908 asylum applicants in EU were considered to be unaccompanied minors according to EuroStat². From 2014 to 2016 this number increased dramatically to 23.150 in 2014, 92.205 in 2015 and 63.280 in 2016³. The increase in applicants was a direct consequence of the so called “European Refugee Crisis”. The majority of unaccompanied refugee minors that came to Europe in 2015 and 2016, first arrived in Greece, and continued their journey to other European countries⁴. In March 2016, the European Council met with Turkey and agreed on what later became known as the “EU-Turkey Agreement” which significantly reduced the flow of refugees coming to the Greek islands. At the same time, the “Balkan route” borders were also closed leaving more than 60.000 refugees stranded in Greece, including an estimated 2.350 unaccompanied minors as of July 2017⁵.

Unaccompanied minors on the move face multiple vulnerabilities and risks that are related to their precarious situation. For example, they face psychological distress due to a lack of future perspectives, violence, physical and sexual abuse, labour and sexual exploitation as well as human trafficking⁶. Due to their young age, they can easily become victims to persons who want to abuse and exploit them, and are therefore in special need of comprehensive care and protection. These risks and conditions may lead to substance abuse as a way for unaccompanied minors to escape and cope with intolerable circumstances⁷.

The majority of unaccompanied minors that have arrived in Greece in 2015 and 2016 are from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Pakistan, with boys comprising more than 90% of the total population. In Greece, unaccompanied and separated minors are entitled to housing, protection by the authorities and are under the legal guardianship of the Public Prosecutor for Minors. Moreover, Greek law specifies that unaccompanied minors, regardless of their status, are given “the possibility to occupy themselves with activities, including games and recreational activities appropriate for their age.” They are also entitled to access the Greek public educational system⁸.

In this report, unaccompanied minors are defined as non-EU nationals or stateless persons under the age of 18 years who arrive on the territory of an EU Member State not accompanied by an adult responsible for the minor, or a minor who is left unaccompanied after having entered the territory of a Member State⁹.

¹ UNHCR: Trees only move in the wind: A study of unaccompanied Afghan children in Europe, 2016. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/research/evalreports/4c1229669/trees-only-move-wind-study-unaccompanied-afghan-children-europe-christine.html>

² EuroStat: Asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors - annual data, 2017. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00194&plugin=1>

³ Eurostat: 63 300 unaccompanied minors among asylum seekers registered in the EU in 2016, 2017. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8016696/3-11052017-AP-EN.pdf/30ca2206-0db9-4076-a681-e069a4bc5290>

⁴ REACH: Children on the move in Italy and Greece, 2017. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/eca/REACH_ITA_GRC_Report_Children_on_the_Move_in_Italy_and_Greece_June_2017.pdf

⁵ National Center for Social Solidarity (E.K.K.A): Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children in Greece, 19 July 2017. Available at: <http://www.ekka.org.gr/files/EKKA%20dashboard%2019-7-2017.pdf>

⁶ Harvard University: Emergency Within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece, 2017. Available at: <https://cdn2.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/04/Emergency-Within-an-Emergency-FXB.pdf>

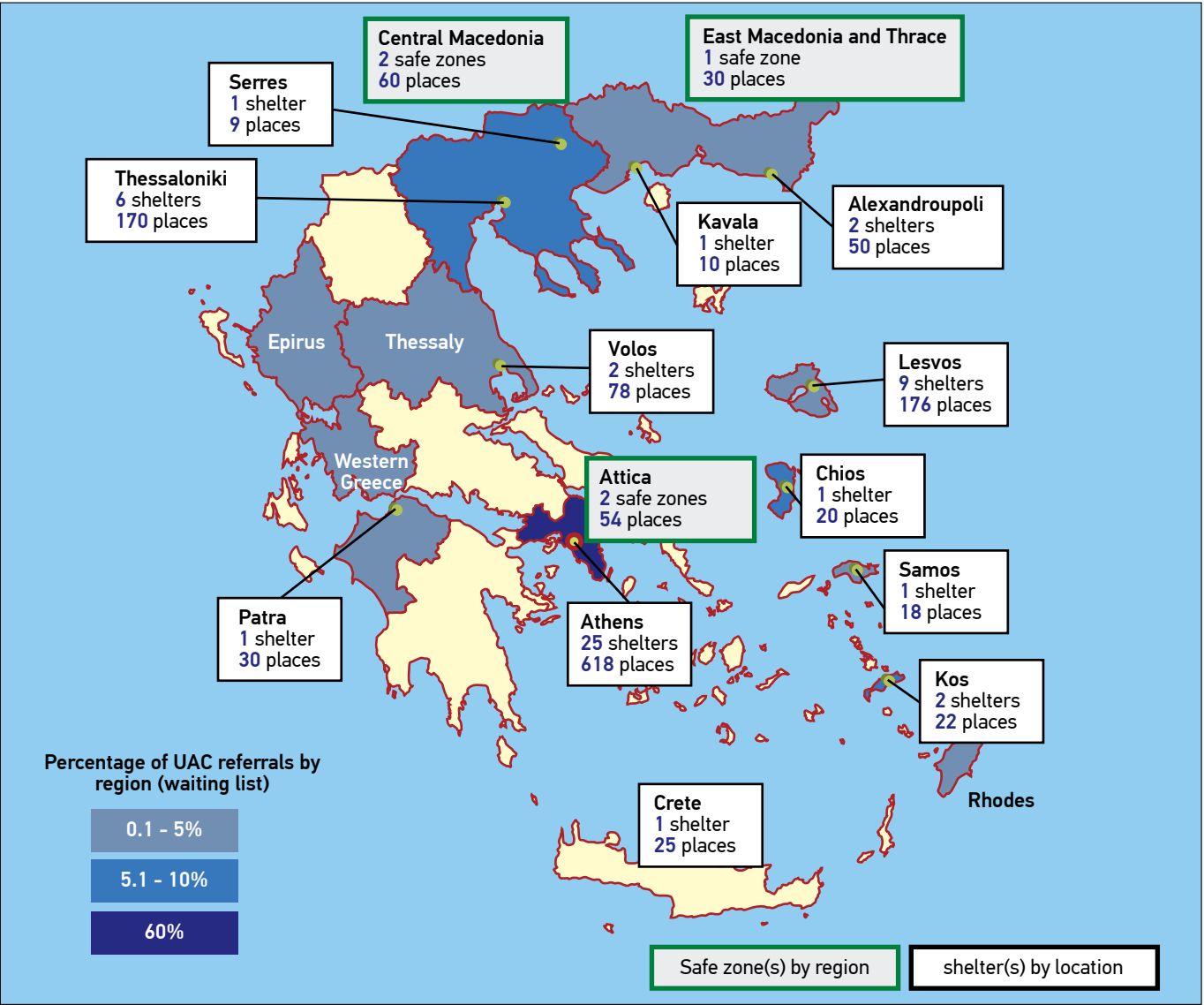
⁷ Save the Children: A tide of self-harm and depression: The EU-Turkey Deal’s devastating impact of child refugees and migrants, 2017. Available at: https://www.savethechildren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FINAL-Report_EU-Turkey-deal_-A-tide-of-self-harm-and-depression_March-20171.pdf

⁸ Human Rights Watch: “Why Are You Keeping Me Here?": Unaccompanied Children Detained in Greece, 2016. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/08/why-are-you-keeping-me-here/unaccompanied-children-detained-greece>

⁹ European Commission: Unaccompanied Minors in The EU, 2013. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/asylum/uam/uam_infographic_a4_en.pdf

1.2 Greek shelter system for unaccompanied minors

In Greece, the coordination of shelters and national referral mechanisms for unaccompanied minors is organized by the National Centre for Social Solidarity (E.K.K.A.). This specialized body refers children to specialized shelters that are responsible for their social well-being. In recent years, there has been a considerable effort to improve the living conditions for unaccompanied minors, and new shelters have opened in order to meet their growing needs. However, the needs have in many instances exceeded the capacity available, and today about half of all unaccompanied minors are left without a space, thus lacking comprehensive care and protection¹⁰. As of July 2017, there are currently 52 shelters with a total capacity of 1.226 spaces, though the amount of unaccompanied refugee children in Greece is 2.350. Out of the 1.350 children on the waiting list for shelters, 159 are in temporary accommodation spaces; 169 are in designated spaces in Open Sites (so-called Safe Zones); 246 are in Reception and Identification Centers; and 117 are in protective custody in police stations¹¹. In 2016, the average waiting time for an unaccompanied minor to be referred to a shelter was 39.5 days.



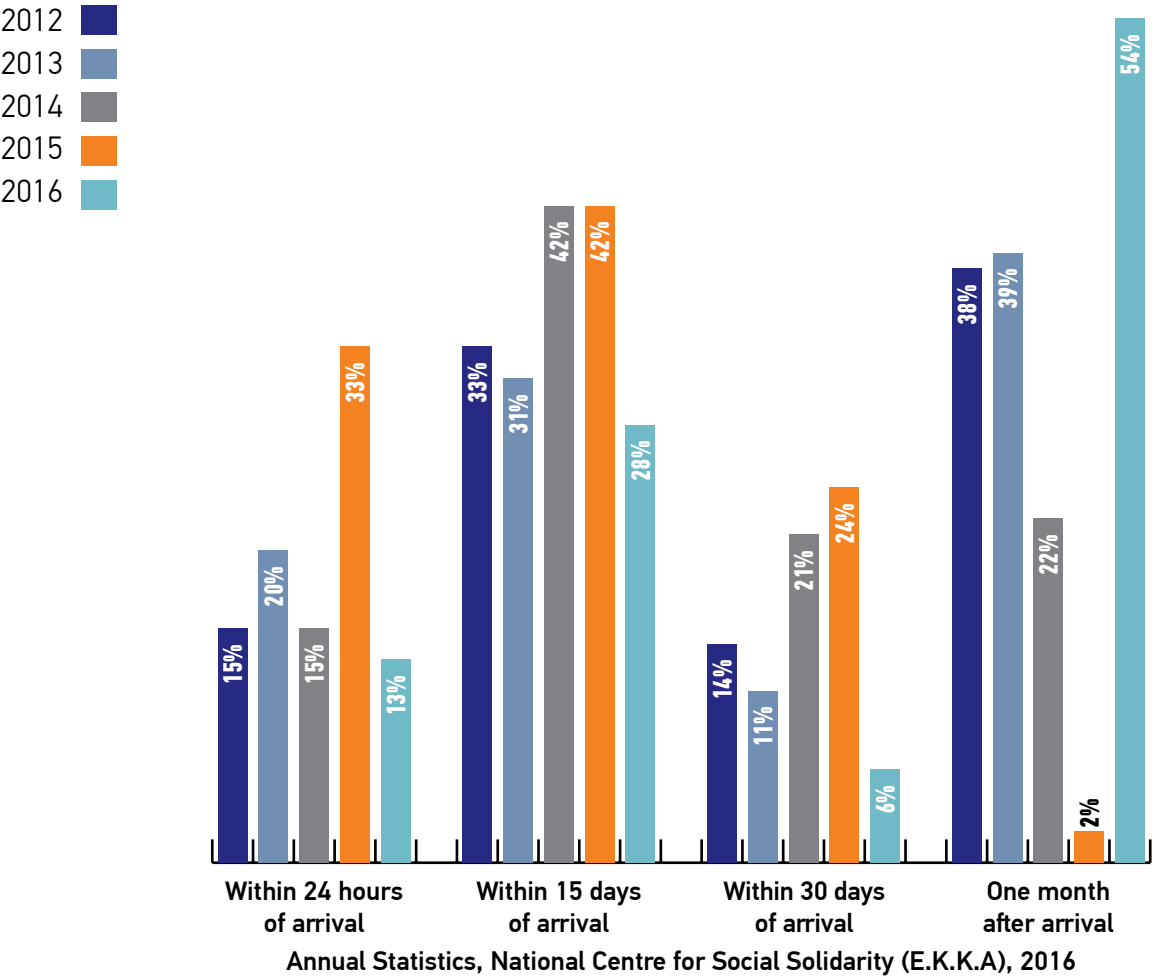
Number of spaces in shelters and safe zones, National Centre for Social Solidarity (E.K.K.A.), July 2017

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch: "Why Are You Keeping Me Here?": Unaccompanied Children Detained in Greece, 2016. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/08/why-are-you-keeping-me-here/unaccompanied-children-detained-greece>
¹¹ National Center for Social Solidarity (E.K.K.A.): Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children in Greece, 19 July 2017. Available at: <http://www.ekka.org.gr/files/EKKA%20dashboard%202019-7-2017.pdf>

1.3 Absconding of unaccompanied minors from shelters in Greece

In Greece, there has been a high rate of unaccompanied minors absconding from shelters. In this report, the term absconding is used for the situation where children suddenly – with or without notice – leave shelters on their own accord. Below is the compiled table from E.K.K.A. on the duration of time that unaccompanied minors stay within a shelter, prior to leaving. The time is indicated in intervals of 1 day, 15 days, 30 days, and above 30 days after arrival. It is important to note that these figures do not only include cases of absconding, but also relocation, family reunification and transfers between accommodation spaces. While it has not been possible to separate the data in the annual statistical report of E.K.K.A., it meanwhile noted that the majority of departures are due to absconding¹². This is also supported by the fact that relocation and family reunification will normally take longer than 30 days.

Duration of time from arrival to shelter before departure



¹² National Center for Social Solidarity (E.K.K.A.): Annual Statistics from 2016: Requests for asylum and unaccompanied minors in Greece, 2017. Available at: http://www.ekka.org.gr/portal_docs/news/454.pdf

The data between 2012 and 2014 shows a complex situation where 15 to 20% of unaccompanied refugee minors left shelters within the first 24 hours of arrival, while over half, left the shelters within the first month of their arrival. Based on the information from the EKKA report it is fair to conclude that the departures during the first 24 hours, 15 days and 30 days are mainly irregular departures and thus cases of absconding. In 2015 these numbers increased dramatically since the borders were open and it was easy to leave Greece. In 2016 the situation was again reversed coinciding with the EU-Turkey agreement and the closing of borders. As a result, an increased number of minors chose to stay in the shelter beyond one month and seek a legal solution to their stay in Europe.

1.4 Absconding of unaccompanied minors in the European perspective

Absconding of unaccompanied minors is also well-known in other European countries. This phenomenon, for example, was addressed in the European Migration Network Study from 2014, detailing the policies, practices and data on unaccompanied minors in the EU and Norway. This study found that there is very limited information on absconding and that only half of the EU Member States hold statistics on unaccompanied minors who go missing or absconded. Thus, there is no compressive or systematic data on unaccompanied minors that abscond or go missing. It was also found that most unaccompanied minors abscond within the first days or weeks of admission to the care facility. The most common reasons for absconding were, amongst others, to continue their journey to join family in other European countries, lengthy asylum procedures, and the belief that they have limited chances of being granted asylum. Furthermore, wrongfully documented or undesired declaration of age by minors and trafficking were also mentioned as reasons for absconding¹³. In the Austrian report for the European Migrant Network study, it was noted that there was a challenge in relation to unaccompanied minors who absconded from reception centres, which would inspire others to do the same¹⁴.

The European Migration Network Study identified a number of measures designed to prevent absconding and disappearance. These included strategies from building trust with the minors, to close monitoring and involving multiple stakeholders that are in contact with the children. The study also identified best practices to prevent and respond to absconding. For example, a reception centre in Belgium does laundry for the minors upon their arrival in order to buy time and prevent them from absconding within the first 24 hours of admission. They also take a photo of the minor, provide them with a cell phone and SIM card and encourage them to open an email account in order to contact them if they go missing. In Norway, fast-track asylum procedures have been implemented for unaccompanied minors with the aim of reducing disappearances and providing immediate protection and clarity for the asylum claim¹⁵. Similarly, in 2016, Missing Children Europe published a report on best practices and key challenges for interagency cooperation to safeguard unaccompanied minors from going missing¹⁶. This was supplemented by a practical guidance for frontline workers to prevent and respond to unaccompanied minors going missing¹⁷.

Despite the high rate of absconding, little is known about this phenomenon and the unaccompanied minors' own experiences in leaving shelters in Greece. This is highlighted in the Greek report for the European Migration Network Study on policies, practices and data on unaccompanied minors in the EU and Norway which concluded that "There is no detailed record, including the reasons, for unaccompanied minors absconding or leaving the accommodation structures [in Greece]"¹⁸.

¹³ European Migration Network: Synthesis Report for the EMN Focussed Study 2014: Policies, practices and data on unaccompanied minors in the EU Member States and Norway, 2015.

Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/emn_study_2014_uams.pdf

¹⁴ Koppenberg S: Unaccompanied Minors in Austria: Legislations, Practices and Statistics, 2014.

Available at: http://www.emn.at/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/EMN_UAM-Study2014_AT_EMN_NCP_eng.pdf

¹⁵ European Migration Network: Synthesis Report for the EMN Focussed Study 2014: Policies, practices and data on unaccompanied minors in the EU Member States and Norway, 2015. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/emn_study_2014_uams.pdf

¹⁶ Missing Children Europe: SUMMIT Report: Best practices and key challenges on interagency cooperation to safeguard unaccompanied children from going missing, 2016. Available at: http://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Docs/report_SUMMIT%20-%20Safeguarding%20Unaccompanied%20Migrant%20Minors_1mrt.pdf

¹⁷ Missing Children Europe: SUMMIT Handbook: Practical guidance on preventing and responding to unaccompanied children going missing, 2016. Available at: <http://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Docs/SUMMIT%20Handbook.pdf>

¹⁸ European Migration Network: Greece Report for the EMN Focussed Study: Policies, practices and data on unaccompanied minors, 2014. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/reports/docs/emn-studies/unaccompanied-minors/greece_national_report_uams_en.pdf



2. OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study is to explore the motivation and experiences that unaccompanied minors have in leaving shelters in Greece. Moreover, the study will explore how care-givers experience absconding and what procedures shelters have in place to support children to stay in care facilities. Finally, the report will provide recommendations for future practice based on the findings of the study. It is our hope that the findings of this study will provide a better understanding of why unaccompanied minors abscond from shelters, and help inform care-givers and policymakers on how to respond to this phenomenon.

The report aims to provide information on experiences within shelters, motives for absconding and the experiences of absconding.

The specific research questions were:

- a.** What are unaccompanied minors' motives for absconding?
- b.** How do unaccompanied children experience absconding?
- c.** What are care-givers' experience of unaccompanied minors absconding from shelters?

3. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected between February and April 2017 in Athens, Greece. It consists of three parts and uses a qualitative research methodology and employs semi-structured interviews and art to explore unaccompanied minors' and care-givers' experiences related to absconding.

The first part includes semi-structured interviews with unaccompanied minors who have previously absconded from a shelter accommodation facility in Greece. Participants were recruited from shelters in Athens where the unaccompanied minors had been referred to, after already having absconded from another shelter one or more time, while one of the participants was identified in a Day Centre outside Athens, who had also absconded from a shelter in Athens.

In total, 9 unaccompanied minors from 5 different shelters were interviewed using a semi-structured design. Each child was first interviewed about his motivation and experience absconding from a shelter in Greece. At the end of each interview the participants were asked if they wanted to make a drawing related to their absconding experience and participate in a follow-up interview to share further information about their experiences. 7 out of 10 participants agreed to a second meeting where they analysed the drawing they had made and were given the opportunity to further elaborate on their experiences of absconding. The participants in the interview were all male, aged 14 to 17, and were from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

In the second part of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff working in shelter facilities. The participants were interviewed about their experience related to unaccompanied minors leaving care facilities and about what measures are, and can be, taken to prevent absconding. A total of 8 staff from 4 different shelters were interviewed for this study. The roles of the staff varied from coordinators to psychologists, social workers and cultural mediators, and helped provide multiple perspectives on the issue of the absconding.

3.1 Limitations

As the study used a qualitative research methodology among a limited sample the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population of unaccompanied minors in Greece.

However, while the sample size of the populations was limited, the data seems to be saturated as it appeared that the data collection had reached a point where no significant new data was being obtained.

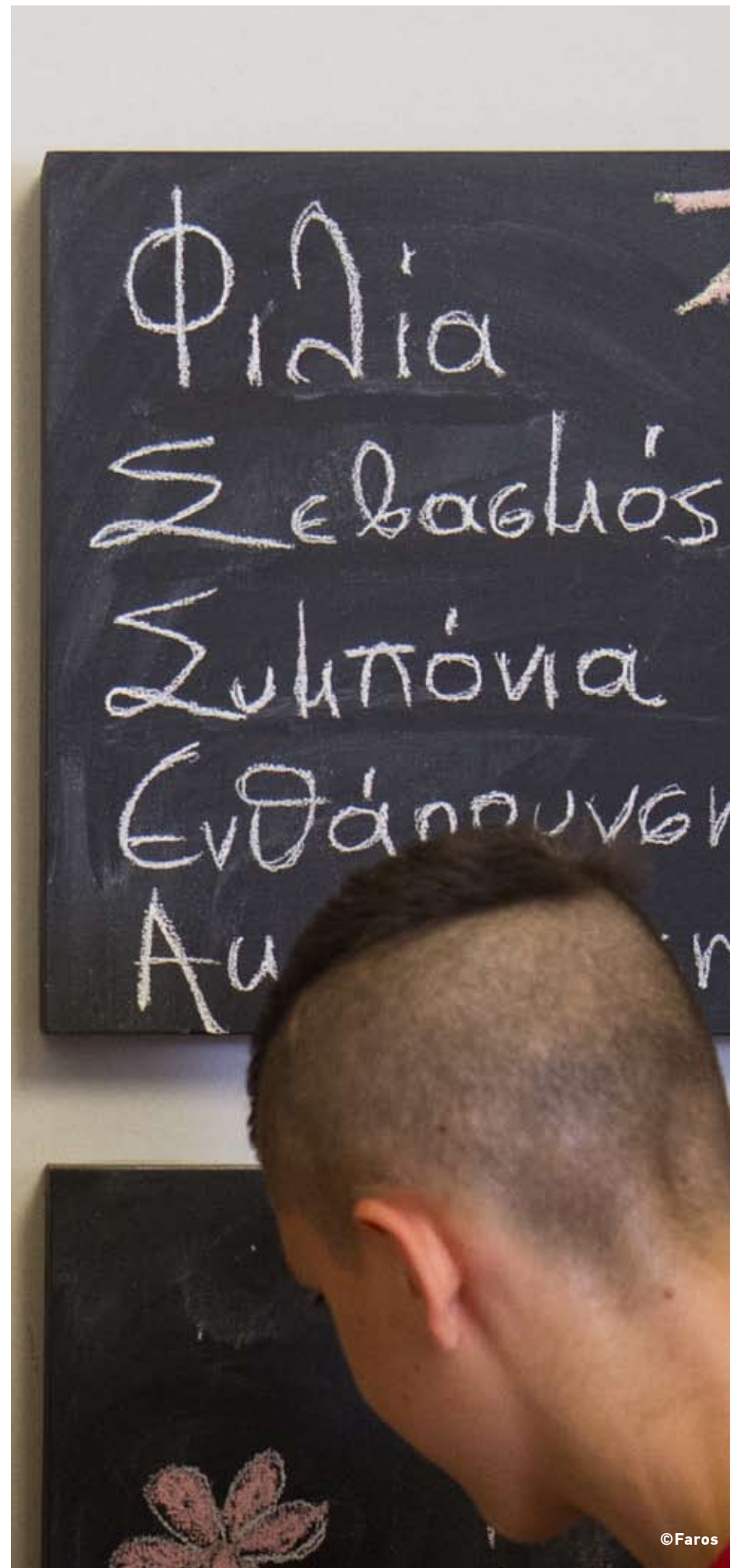
The main challenge was the difficulty in recruiting unaccompanied minors that had previously absconded from a shelter and were now based in a new shelter. 10 shelters for unaccompanied minors located in Athens were invited to participate in the study, and of these 5 agreed, 2 declined and 3 did not respond to the invitation. It was a criterion to only include children that were already in a shelter facility, as they were in a stable environment and had access to protective and holistic care.

4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Conducting interviews with vulnerable children is a highly delicate issue, and should only be conducted with the utmost sensitivity in order not to cause the participants any distress or harm. For this reason, the interviewers only touched upon issues that were directly related to the topic of absconding and were highly aware of any distress expressed by the participants.

The participants were informed about the topic and purpose of the interview, and were informed about anonymity, safe storage of data, and the right to stop or withdraw their interview. In the reporting data all participants have been anonymised. All participants gave verbal and written consent to participate in the study.

The Public Prosecutor for Minors, who is the legal guardian for unaccompanied refugee minors, gave permission to interview the children in the study, following consent from the minors and the shelters that were hosting them.





5. UNACCOMPANIED MINORS EXPERIENCES OF ABSCONDING

The following chapter presents the findings from the interviews with unaccompanied minors. These are divided into two main sections: reasons for absconding and the experience of absconding.

The participants reported push as well as pull factors for absconding. While they mentioned the search for a better future in another country as a main reason for absconding, they also mentioned other pull factors such as expectations from their family to leave and their desire to be reunited with family in other countries. We identified five push factors that the participants mentioned as reasons contributing to their leaving shelters. These include: safety and rules in the shelter, poor conditions in the shelters, lack of peers and caring adults and lack of perspectives when staying in the shelter.

5.1 Reasons for absconding

5.1.1 Looking for a better future

Most of the participants linked the experience of absconding with their overall migration narrative to find a future in a place where they could live in peace, get an education, and have opportunities to lead a good life. Similarly, most participants did not see Greece as the country where they could access these opportunities.

“In Afghanistan we cannot live, we had land but it was taken by Taliban [...] My parents’ dream for me and my brother was to leave from Afghanistan due to the bad situation there. My dream is to move to Germany”

This participant noted how the dream of reaching Germany was the driving force which kept him motivated to move ahead. Among all the participants it appeared that Greece was never their imagined destination country. This also meant that children would choose to leave shelters in order to continue their journey without knowing what was ahead of them. Some participants were determined to continue the journey because they had already travelled far across other countries and were now close to their desired destination. One participant mentioned how he had absconded from the shelter and traveled to the northern border in Greece with the desire to cross the border and continue his journey:

“I stayed in Idomeni for 27 days hoping that the borders would open. I was very disappointed because the dream I had to go somewhere could not be reached”

Therefore, it was also a large disappointment when the participant realised that it was no longer possible to continue the journey as he had imagined. Similarly, he was in contact with friends that had already made the trip ahead, and now felt that his opportunity had been lost. This was expressed as a loss, giving a feeling of high insecurity for the future, and a feeling of being stuck in Greece.

5.1.2 Expectations from relatives to continue the journey

Another pattern in minors' absconding was that their relatives were expecting them to continue their journey. This was both from relatives in their countries of origin as well as relatives that had already reached another country.

"I have to start working and send money to the family [...] I will eat ok here, but my relatives, my family that are behind ... what will they eat? Will they eat from the ground?"

This participant explained how he could live in the shelter and have enough for his living, but that his family back home expected him to continue his journey, so that he was also able to support them. These expectations from relatives put a high pressure on unaccompanied minors when deciding to continue their journey onwards, despite the possible risks. This becomes particularly difficult when the children do not have any means to move out of Greece, while at the same time having to balance the pressures from relatives that are encouraging them to continue their journey onwards.

5.1.3 Delays in procedures and referrals

It appeared that another motive for absconding is the lack of, or delay in family reunification and relocation procedures, which may lead unaccompanied minors to take matters into their own hands. One participant absconded from the shelter because he was disappointed about the delays in the family reunification procedures. He had been in Greece waiting, for more than one year and had seen many other children be reunited with their families.

"For us Afghans, the situation wasn't [easy] because the Syrians who were hosted in shelters were relocated or reunified to Germany or other countries, but we had no other choice than to come here [in Patra]. It was not an easy decision to leave the shelter; I had to take under consideration that I have to stay in the street and handle the difficulties it brings..."

This participant noted that he felt that the procedures for Afghans were slower than those for Syrians and that this made him feel discouraged and led him to believe that the best opportunity to join his family was to try to leave irregularly.

Another reason mentioned for absconding were the delays experienced in procedures related to transfers from transit accommodation shelters to permanent shelters within Greece.

"I was waiting for too long to be moved to Athens, but they didn't [transfer me] and I decided to leave on my own..."

In the above example, the participant mentioned that he absconded because he wanted to leave from the transit shelter on the island, to go to Athens and then continue to another European country. He had already been waiting for three months to be transferred to a shelter on the mainland.

As the result of delays, one participant mentioned that older unaccompanied minors feel pressured by their age, knowing that the same opportunities and services will not be available to them once they turn 18.

"All the minors, we say the same thing. When we discuss we say that we have to leave Greece, to move to France, to UK... its ok when you are under age but [after you turn 18] then what?"

The participants reported that they cannot stay in shelters after they turn 18, and that it would therefore be better to continue pursuing their journey, rather than waiting for procedures to be completed.

5.1.4 Lack of safety and disagreements on rules in the shelter

A further pattern that appeared in the interviews concerned the rules of the shelter. Some children had been in shelters where there were very few rules, and as a result of this, appeared to be more chaotic and felt less safe. In one instance, a child reported how there were regular fights in the shelter and that the lack of rules created a feeling of chaos with no one caring about them.

"The children had many fights and broke things... if there are no rules everyone does whatever he wants"

Two children mentioned there was little supervision and regular fights often broke out between the children as well as with strangers that would enter the premises. Due to a feeling of insecurity these two boys decided to leave the shelter and opted to stay on the streets. They related rules about curfew hours and participation in activities with safety and stability and mentioned that this was important.

At the same time, the older participants in particular expressed that it was difficult to live in a place with too many rules and procedures, like other younger unaccompanied minors. They were used to being independent and managing their own lives.

They mentioned that they were treated as children by having to live in a supervised environment with many rules. This may explain some accounts of absconding, where unaccompanied minors leave shelters in order to have more freedom to live as they want and not be bound by rules. Thus, it may be a challenge for some shelters with a large age gap between children and teens, to find a rule-set that suits both groups.

"We may be 16 or 17 years old, but we have the experience of a 25-year-old man. I mean, we spent one year in the streets, and we have so many experiences and we understand what we have to do..."

These adolescents have experience in travelling and managing their own lives through their long journey and have built resilience and independence. They are then placed in a protected facility and have to comply with the rules of a shelter, which they can appreciate on the one hand, but which they also feel restricts them.

5.1.5 Lack of inclusive services and poor conditions

While it appeared from the interviews that the minors would abscond due to poor conditions in the shelters, several of the minors also commented on services and circumstances that they felt were unwelcoming or inappropriate and which contributed to forming a negative impression. One minor described how he arrived at the shelter and was kept waiting before being shown to his room which had not yet been prepared for him, with conditions that were not welcoming:

“We had to wait many hours until they gave us a room, and when I got inside my room, it was very dirty, it smelt really bad, there was no light – it was broken”

Another important element in the feeling of being welcomed seemed to be that information was given in their own language. A participant explained how he was placed in the shelter, but did not receive any information because the shelter did not have an available interpreter:

“An interpreter only came 5 days later”

Many of the participants mentioned the importance of interpreters in helping them to adjust into the new setting. The importance of shelters providing a welcoming environment where the children can feel safe during the first hours and days of their stay seems crucial so that the minor does not easily lose hope in the new surroundings, and also prevents absconding.

5.1.6 Lack of peers

A number of participants mentioned the importance of peers and friends when highlighting the positive and resilience building factors in their life. In the same way, the lack of peers and friends seemed to negatively impact the well-being of minors. In one case, a participant mentioned how he was placed in a shelter and to his disappointment found that there was no interpreter or other minors that spoke his language. The frustration of not having anybody to communicate with, led him to abscond from the shelter within a few days of entering into it.

“I felt lonely... loneliness is a bad thing. I couldn't discuss with anyone... imagine yourself to be in a place where you can laugh with no one, make fun with no one. This is not life without being with someone who takes care of you and you can have fun with”

Ensuring that shelters have care-givers who introduce newcomers to new friends within the first days in the shelter, is important in order to limit the vulnerability of absconding. Here, supportive adults have a crucial role to play in helping the children create friendships and a welcoming environment where minors can feel cared for and looked after.

5.1.7 Lack of activities, education and future perspectives

Another key factor was that it was important for participants to have a meaningful every day with education and recreational activities and thus create a daily routine. One participant mentioned that:

“I had asked to participate in school more than 15 times to different people in the staff [...] So I gathered my things, I had nothing else to take from that place...there were no activities”

Many of the minors interviewed mentioned that they had dreams to be educated and to learn skills that would help them secure a good future.

One participant noted that he absconded from the shelter because he did not feel he was being heard by the staff and desperately wanted to continue his schooling:

“Until I get where I want to go I cannot imagine anything, until now I don't go to school so how can I dream to do something...”

Therefore, it seems that lack of educational opportunities within the shelter or opportunities to enroll in school has a negative impact on them and is a reason for children to leave a shelter.

5.2 The experience after absconding from the shelter

The participants reported mixed feelings in relation to absconding from shelter facilities. On the one hand, the decision to leave the shelter provided some participants with the opportunity to find a place to live with better conditions, or to pursue their desire to continue their journey towards another country. On the other hand, participants mentioned feelings of stress and anxiety related to absconding and being alone on the move. The participants all mentioned risks and dangers related to not being in a shelter, but that this was necessary in order to try to continue their journey.

“When you leave a shelter there is danger. You don’t know where to go, what to eat”

Some participants noted how this insecurity made the decision to abscond difficult, as they did not know what circumstances would await them once they had left the shelter.

Three participants travelled to the Western port city of Patra after absconding from the shelter in the hope to get on a ferry that would take them to Italy. There are several risks connected to making this perilous journey as is noted by one of the participants that shared this unsuccessful attempt:

“We made a special effort to leave, but didn’t have good luck. One day I managed to hide in the truck. The truck started moving towards the ferry, and I was hidden in a place where I could not get out. Then the police came and looked with a flashlight and they found me; if you don’t come out they bring a hose with cold water and then you are forced to come out and when I did so, they beat me a lot. Then they drove us to a room, handcuffed, and were searching for our papers”

The participants noted being caught by the police as one of the main risks and concerns related to travelling alone. This participant noted how the police used force and violence against him. Another participant also tried to use the same route, but noted that it is increasingly difficult and with high risks, but that refugees have already endured many difficulties during their migration journey, so they are willing to take risks to make it the last mile.

“Dangers are everywhere in the street, there is danger everywhere. Especially if you get onto the truck to go on the boat, it is a very dangerous situation. You can try every day for 2-3 months in order to pass through once. We have come through many difficulties, that is why we are taking the risk to encounter the dangers in front of our eyes”

Several of the participants mentioned that it was an easy decision to leave the shelter as they had already been used to travelling and surviving on their own, and felt that they had already endured many difficulties. However, as the borders are no longer easy to cross, participants expressed frustration about being stuck and not being able to continue their journey, despite their attempts to do so. The following participant absconded from the shelter with the aim of traveling to Germany to be reunited with his aunt, but found that there was no way to reach this goal:

“I don’t want to stay in Greece... my aunt is in Germany, here I am alone, but in Germany she will take care of me”

The participant sums up the feelings of being stuck and alone, which led to disappointment and hopelessness about his situation.

5.3 Summary of findings from interviews with unaccompanied minors

The interviews with the minors showed that the search for a better future is a driving pull-factor, which makes it difficult for the minors to look for other alternatives to absconding. Moreover, high expectations from family members to make it to another country in order to support the family, as well as the desire to reunite with family in another country were also driving pull-factors.

Among push factors for absconding, we found that these included disappointment of delays in the asylum and reunification procedures, the lack of legal means to travel to another country, and the circumstances in the shelters. While some knew of the family reunification procedures, others appeared to be unaware or to have lost hope in the procedures. They rather opt to pursue travelling through irregular routes. These conditions appeared to have left some of the participants disappointed, hopeless and not able to see any perspectives for the future, which led them to leave.

Another pattern identified for which minors leave the shelter was the circumstances in the shelter: the lack of security and their disagreement with the rules. Some of the participants expressed that they felt the circumstances in the shelter were chaotic and unsafe, while the older participants’ frustrations were related to the limitations imposed by the rules and regulations of the shelter. Large age gap differences between the minors residing in a specific shelter presented different needs and challenges that need to be addressed. Some minors expressed that they were not used to adults setting limitations, and therefore had a behavioral pattern of being independent and on their own.

A further particularly important factor influencing minors’ absconding patterns was the absence of inclusive services and having no one to hear or support them in the first hours of reception. Combined with poor conditions, this has been identified as a push factor for some of the participants absconding from the shelter. In the same way, the lack of peers and friends seemed to negatively impact the well-being of minors which lead to thoughts about leaving a shelter.

Finally, the analysis also showed that it is of critical importance that minors are provided with educational and recreational activities that may support their developmental, psychosocial well-being and provide them with a future perspective. As the unaccompanied minors are determined to leave for another country, they are not able to find meaning in their current situation unless they are supported in finding a meaningful everyday life with education and new short or long term perspectives. This calls for alternative educational methodologies that can both provide meaning during a short term waiting period, and which may also provide the minor with an alternative future perspective.

6. CARE-GIVERS EXPERIENCES OF ABSCONDING

The following chapter presents the findings from the interviews with care-givers working in shelters for unaccompanied or separated minors. These are divided into three main sections based on the analysis: reasons for absconding, building trust with unaccompanied minors, and addressing absconding with unaccompanied minors.

The staff working in shelters prior to, or since 2015, mentioned differences they had seen during the peak of the Refugee Crisis when the borders were open, in comparison to the period after March 2016, where it became difficult to move out of Greece. Up to March 2016, staff mentioned that the children would stay in the shelter from as little as a few hours up to a few days before absconding. After March 2016, it has been noted that the average time that children would stay in shelters increased to several months. The interviews with the care-givers concentrated on their experiences of children that absconded from shelters and factors that influenced this process. Based on the interviews, we identified the following themes relevant to the study: reasons for absconding and building trust with minors.

6.1 Reasons for absconding

Among care-givers, there were 4 main reasons identified for minors absconding: leaving for another country, pressure from relatives, delays in asylum related procedures, and a behavioural pattern of being 'on the move'.

6.1.1 Leaving for another country

The care-givers mentioned that the most common reason for absconding is that minors want to reach another destination country. In most of the interviews it was mentioned that minors, and especially adolescents, already have a specific destination country in mind when they first arrive at the shelter. An interpreter from a shelter expressed it in the following way:

“Everyone wants to leave. They are telling us that when money comes in their hands they will leave...”



Participants mentioned that the minors were determined and that it was therefore difficult to change their minds to remain at the shelter. Some participants expressed that the minors' desire to leave the shelter affected his/her engagement in activities and thereby their overall wellbeing. This led them to boredom which increased their risk of absconding.

6.1.2 Pressure from relatives

Pressure from minors' relatives to continue their journey or to start working to send money back to their families was also mentioned by the interviewed care-givers.

“The pressure from their family is to... leave [the shelter].... ‘don’t stay... why go to school, why do you stay in [the shelter]’. Also, because they have adopted an adult role, they have inside them the responsibility and feel guilty and anxious that their parents are back waiting for them. And also, like every child they want to prove to their parents that they succeeded to live in Europe and have a job...”

Relatives may have invested in their children, and expect them to continue and reach another country of destination, which forces some minors to abscond. This responsibility is a heavy burden on their shoulders.

6.1.3 Delays in procedures

Participants also mentioned how the long procedures and delays in the asylum and family reunification procedures led to disappointment amongst minors and led some to take matters into their own hands:

“We had one child who had relatives in Germany and when we told him that the process will take approximately 6-10 months to move there, he told us that he can be there tomorrow; and indeed after a few days, he was there...”

The will to leave for another country makes it difficult for minors to wait for many months for the relevant legal procedures to be processed. However, participants also mentioned that it was easier for minors to stay in a shelter if they knew that their case was being processed and that there was a future perspective.

The caregivers mentioned that many minors could not see a future in Greece, and that they felt that they were forgotten by the system and that no one was working hard to find them a future perspective.

“...it is so important for them to have a future perspective so it is very important for them to know that people are working on their case and they are working on obtaining a more durable solution”

According to the interviewed care-givers, it is crucial that minors can see that there are future perspectives. The feeling of not being supported in future planning and preparations was a reason for the minors leaving. It is essential that minors are provided with information on the development and status of their cases.

6.1.4 Being on the move

A main reason for minors leaving a shelter was that they had developed a survival behavior of constantly being on the move after being on a long journey alone and found it difficult to establish relationships of trust with care-givers. One of the participants explains:

“These minors have acquired the behavior of going from one place to another. They left their country of origin [and] travelled alone to Greece and their goal is to travel alone; so for them a stable place does not exist...”

Unaccompanied minors that are forced to leave their country of origin are in many ways also forced into adulthood, to take the responsibility of their life and to survive. However, they are still children who are not always able to understand the full consequences of the risks they face.

Many of the caregivers mentioned that minors wanted to be in less restricted settings than what shelters sometimes offered because they had been accustomed to being more independent. It was mentioned that adolescents told care-givers that they want to live independently, without rules and restrictions, and stay out late with friends.

“I think is it just that they find it very hard to be in a shelter with rules you know and with a curfew, and some of them are also 17”

Especially for the older group of minors, it appeared that it was more difficult to comply with the rules that apply within a shelter as they saw themselves as nearly adults and capable of managing their own lives. Participants explained that children who are less involved in the activities in the shelter and who would rather spend their time building a network in other places, may be more likely to run away.

“I can just recall one incident that was a guy [that absconded]. He was always away from the shelter and I think he never engaged in any of the activities we have”

It therefore appears that it is important to try to engage unaccompanied minors in the activities undertaken in the shelter in order to prevent absconding, as some minors may already be contemplating leaving the shelter. Overall, it appeared that the mentality of being on the move is a challenge that needs to be addressed in order to prevent absconding. Participants mentioned that a way for the minors to feel attached to the shelter and start settling was trust building with caring adults who can provide minors with a future alternative to their current unclear situation.

6.2 Building trust to prevent absconding

The issue of trust appeared as a central theme during the interviews with the care-givers. The staff emphasized the value of building a trustful relationship with the minors to achieve functionality at different levels of everyday life, as well as to prevent absconding. Participants noted that it was important to build trust with the minors when they arrive and slowly give them time to adapt to the new surroundings. Care-givers noted that it is important to let new children settle in and thereafter slowly explain the operational procedures of the shelter.

“The first thing we do is give him space to take some rest and adapt [...] if he comes from an island he needs time to rest [...] we don’t want to press the child from the first moment with questions... firstly, we show him his room, we let him rest and introduce him to the other children, we show the shelter facilities and just take basic information from him and 2 days later we conduct the interview”

According to the interviewed care-givers, new arrivals can be very insecure about their new surroundings, and it is therefore crucial to provide additional attention and support during the first period. The analysis showed that it is essential that newcomers are given the possibility to quickly create new bonds of trust with caring adults, as an alternative to networks outside of the shelter, and with those who are still ‘on the move’.

An interpreter stressed that children show trust in the interpreters, who come from the same country, and that there is a cultural respect between them.

“They listen to us... they respect the elders; we are like parents for them...”

Thus, interpreters are key in building trust with minors in the shelter, and it is therefore important to draw upon them to positively influence the children living in the shelter.



6.3 Addressing absconding

The issue of how to address absconding varied among the staff interviewed. Some shelters did not address this issue, as it was considered that doing so could foster ideas of leaving the shelter.

“We don’t discuss about the consequences of an irregular escape [...] we discuss about the legal procedures to move on another country, we say to them to be patient and [that] we will stay on their side, and take care of them [...] we don’t open a discussion about an irregular escape because we don’t want to put this idea in their mind”

Instead, the care-giver from this shelter noted that it is important to focus on the legal channels that the minors may pursue and to support them during this process. Other shelters had a different approach and facilitated workshops and group discussions where absconding, difficulties of migration, and risk of human trafficking were addressed:

“We offer individual sessions [to children] and we organize group sessions or workshops about the dangers of the process of leaving [the shelter] and also we have conducted workshops about traffickers or trafficking... [because we understood that] in the mind of the minors the trafficker is a good person because he provides them with the solution of going to another country”

In this shelter absconding was directly addressed to safeguard minors if they should leave on their own. Minors were encouraged not to abscond, but the shelter was also aware that there is a high probability of absconding. The care-giver also emphasized the need to address the issue of human trafficking with minors as they could easily become victims of abuse and exploitation in the hands of traffickers.



6.4 Summary of findings from interviews with care-givers

The care-givers expressed difficulties in providing an alternative to absconding when the children were determined to leave the shelter to go to another country. The fact that they do not want to stay in Greece influenced the minors’ engagement in activities, and thereby their overall wellbeing. This again led them to boredom and a greater vulnerability to abscond.

The importance of the minors being introduced to caring adults was also mentioned as a crucial factor for the minors quickly feeling at home, which helped take care of their immediate needs. Considering that more than 15% of unaccompanied children abscond from shelter facilities within the first 24 hours of arrival, it is important for shelters to have procedures for welcoming and introducing new arrivals to care-givers and a focal point for this may be of crucial importance to preventing absconding. In the interviews with care-givers, it was important that the minors are introduced to the shelter and its routine to ensure that the minors felt welcomed and informed.

The minors felt pressure from relatives in their home country to leave and continue their journey. Moreover, the minors expressed to the care-givers that the long waiting periods for procedures to go through, were making them leave the shelter, and the lack of future perspective made them hopeless. The correlations between the pressure from relatives, delays in procedures, and lack of future perspectives were central for absconding. The minors felt pressured from family and at the same time, stuck in lengthy procedures. Though there might be a given timeframe for family reunification procedures, the interviews showed that the responsibility for the family at home makes the minors try illegal travel routes, as they have a difficult time finding alternative future perspectives.

Moreover, the care-givers explained that the preferable future in most cases is to leave for another country. It is therefore of great importance to keep the children well-informed about their case and to have someone take the lead in finding the best solution. In cases where the children may have a reason to stay in Greece, it is important that the child is able to see a future perspective in Greece. This was expressed in relation to the insecurity around what would happen when minors turned 18 years old. To support the minor, it is important that they know education is an option which gives them a future perspective. Individual assigned plans according to the minors’ capacity and future dreams, combined with a close follow up by trusted care-givers, may prevent some minors from absconding.

Being on the move appeared to be a main reason for the minors not being able to adjust to a new context. This behaviour left minors unwilling to venture outside of their journey networks and made them less likely to be involved in shelter activities. In this, it may be important to initiate social activities within the shelter in order to build social cohesion as this may prevent absconding. For many of the minors it was difficult for them to adapt to a settled context with rules and regulations. Care-givers mentioned that over time some minors changed these patterns after feeling they were in a safe environment with caring adults, which can provide them with a future alternative to their current unclear situation.

It was found that it is essential that unaccompanied minors have a possibility to develop new bonds of trust with caring adults so that minors can share their thoughts and concerns, and provide an alternative to networks outside the shelter from those ‘on the move’ and as current family substitutes.



7. CONCLUSION

This report provides insight into the issue of absconding as seen through both the eyes of minors who have experienced leaving shelters, as well as the professionals who work closely with them. Unaccompanied minors and youth are faced with multiple risks and challenges due to their vulnerable situation, and have entered difficult circumstances at an early age. At the same time, it is important to note that they are children and youth at a critical developmental stage in their lives. In general, adolescents are characterised by being more willing to take risks, which may also explain some of the rather fast decisions to leave the shelters. From the interviews with unaccompanied minors we found that the most reported reason for absconding from shelters was the longing to travel to another European country, either because the participants had relatives there or did not find perspectives in staying in Greece. Moreover, it was found that delays in asylum, family reunification and relocation procedures was an important motive for absconding, where minors would rather take matters into their own hands.

The participants reported that the lack of quality and services in the shelter was related to absconding. Moreover, social cohesion and relationships to other residents and staff in the shelter was also linked to absconding. This was especially the case for minors that were alone from their country or language group, which led to feelings of isolation in the shelters, which would be further amplified if there is a lack of available interpretation services. It was found that when a cultural mediator or an interpreter can offer support it may help to enhance the well-being and reduce stress and helplessness deriving from not being understood. Similarly, it appeared to be important for minors to have peers from their own countries or that speak the same language. Engaging new children in social activities should also be considered as a way with which to build relations with other children in the shelter, and may also help to prevent absconding.

In the study, we found that unaccompanied minors had taken risks travelling alone, engaging with smugglers and human traffickers by running away from shelters. Therefore, it is increasingly important to educate and engage unaccompanied minors in discussions to identify healthy behaviors, risks, and risk mitigation related to migration.



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8. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several steps that need to be taken to support unaccompanied minors in shelters and to help prevent absconding. Additionally, there are structural changes related to policies and practices which may lead to absconding and which should be addressed to protect children and to promote the best interest of the child.

For shelters we recommend:

- To have procedures in place on welcoming and introducing new-comers to the shelter, applicable at all times, regardless of the time of the intake, which can be ensured by familiarizing all staff – even the night shift – on the said procedures. It is essential to arrange interpretation services to support in the induction process and have the procedures and rules of the shelter clearly explained.
- To ensure that minimum standards are met and that basic needs are covered including: food, clothes, psychosocial support, legal aid, recreational activities and access to education and healthcare.
- To introduce newcomers to the other children living in the shelter as well as care-givers during the first hours of arrival.
- To facilitate team-building activities within the shelter to build social cohesion.
- To provide age-differentiated activities and rules within the shelter.
- To provide children with daily routines and activities that will create resilience and support their psychological well-being and engagement in the shelter.
- To inform children about the process for legal appointments and family reunification or relocation procedures.
- To ensure that all members of staff are aware and trained on issues of absconding.
- To address absconding and to implement sessions that inform minors of the risks of human trafficking and smuggling.

For the Greek authorities and EU member states we recommend:

- To ensure that referrals to specific shelters take into account the stated capacity of each shelter to support the specific linguistic characteristics of the minor referred, while making sure specific nationalities are not excluded from the system.
- To provide durable lawful solutions for unaccompanied children in Greece that would present a viable option other than absconding, including integration procedures for asylum applicants in Greece, family reunification and even alternatives such as relocation.
- To ensure faster family reunification and relocation procedures for vulnerable groups including unaccompanied minors.
- To provide reliable information to unaccompanied minors on the process of their asylum claims as well as family reunification and relocation applications.

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