Protecting Children on the Move: 
15 Recommendations to Address the Risks of Abuse, Exploitation, and Going Missing

ICMEC developed the following recommendations to assist our partners including law enforcement, policymakers, industry stakeholders, educators, and healthcare professionals around the world in the protection of children in vulnerable communities.

ICMEC envisions a world where children can grow up safe from exploitation, abuse, or the risk of going missing. We believe every child deserves a safe childhood.
Migrant children should be recognized first and foremost as deserving of special protection, regardless of their immigration or citizenship status.

It is critical that children be recognized above all else as children and provided with special protection and care. As defined by Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is anyone below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. A child-first approach means that they must be provided with housing, given access to other child-friendly resources including healthcare and education, and concerted efforts should be made to keep or reunify the child with their family. When the primary focus is on a person’s legal status, a child may be labeled an ‘alien’ or a non-citizen, and their health, developmental and emotional needs may be forgotten or minimized. Critical services may become inaccessible, and efforts of professionals may be directed toward repatriation or detention rather than ensuring the child’s basic human rights are met and their wellbeing prioritized.

The best interests of the child should be prioritized and protected in all circumstances.

All children have the right to have their best interests assessed and taken as a primary consideration, and the guarantee that their rights will be implemented and upheld, whenever a decision is made that concerns the child. The best interests of the child are considered a fundamental, interpretative legal principle. If a legal provision is open to more than one interpretation, the interpretation which most effectively serves the child’s best interests should be chosen. Whenever a decision is to be made that will affect a child, the decision-making process must include an evaluation of the possible impact (positive or negative) of the decision on the child or children concerned.¹

It is essential for professionals serving migrant children and families to have knowledge of, and respect for a child’s rights. Children must also understand their own basic human rights (commensurate with their developmental capacity) and feel comfortable asking questions and asserting those rights in a safe space where respect and dignity are ensured. The rights to information and having a voice in decision-making are only useful if a child understands these rights and is empowered to claim them.


Refugee children are 5x more likely to be out of school than their non-refugee peers.

UNHCR, Refugee Statistics, 2021
The UN’s World Migration Report 2022 reported 281 million international migrants of which an estimated 41 million were child migrants.

03 All children should be registered by the relevant authorities whenever they cross international borders.

Immigration authorities should register all children, including migrant children, who cross an international border. Authorities should capture as much information about the child as is possible, including a photo and description of the child, and details regarding all adults traveling with the child. This information should be maintained on a digital platform that can be shared across agencies and used to locate the child in the event they go missing or are separated from their families/guardians.

04 Relevant immigration and border security authorities should be trained to recognize potential signs of trafficking in children.

Children in migration are more vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers, especially during crises. Training border personnel to recognize trafficking, especially in the context of migration, as well as on related legal provisions and responsibilities can better equip them to identify children who may be at risk. Border security and immigration authorities should screen children arriving in their country for signs of trafficking, especially in circumstances where they are traveling with adults to whom a legal relationship cannot be determined, or it is determined that there is no legal relationship at all. In these cases, the adult(s) should be detained until their intentions can be confirmed. It should be noted that the adults traveling may themselves be victim(s) or even unaware of the trafficking that is taking place.

05 Professionals working with vulnerable populations should be provided with regular training and mental health support.

Individuals working with child migrants and their families may suffer from secondary traumatic stress (STS) due to exposure to the extensive trauma the children may describe. Regular, targeted training for these professionals is crucial to adequately equip them with protective practices to help prevent STS, burnout, and other consequences and to identify and address these symptoms in others. Mental health and wellness support at an institutional level are crucial to minimize the adverse effects.
06 Professionals working with migrant children should be trained on culturally sensitive, trauma-informed, rights-based, child-centered care, and the immediate, short-term, and long-term health consequences of mass and forced migration for children.

Professionals working with migrant children must receive specialized training and have the expertise to properly care for and protect these children, regardless of individual circumstances. Training should be required for educators, and health and mental health professionals working directly or indirectly with children, as well as for border officials, attorneys, judges, and others who encounter child migrants and their families. Appropriate training will further ensure a focus on the safety and best interests of children once they arrive at their destinations. Child migrants must receive comprehensive healthcare and be offered mental health assessments and support. The disruption migration has on a child’s daily life can be detrimental to their mental health and social wellbeing. Furthermore, discrimination from the community can contribute to feelings of isolation putting these children at risk for PTSD, depression, and other behavioral problems. Those providing care must be trained to work with children, understand the impact of trauma and its intersectionality with culture, and be able to accommodate linguistic and other needs.

07 Government support and funding should be secured for the provision of accessible medical and mental health care for migrant and refugee children, with an emphasis on continuity of care.

Migrant children commonly experience multiple traumatic events before, during, and/or after their journey; they have significant physical and mental health needs (e.g., infection, poorly treated chronic diseases, injury, major depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder). It is critical that these children have easily accessible, free or very low-cost, primary medical and mental health services that accommodate the special needs surrounding their immigration experience (e.g., cultural and linguistic needs, challenges with legal documentation).

Government support and funding is necessary so that medical and mental health care services that are culturally appropriate and trauma-informed can be offered to children and caregivers. Appropriate treatment by trained professionals and access to psychotropic medications must be accessible to those with severe chronic mental health conditions. Clinics that integrate medical, reproductive health, mental health, dental, and social services make optimal medical homes for migrant and refugee children and help to ensure continuity of care.
Validated screening tools to identify children who have experienced abuse or exploitation during migration, and comprehensive protocols for responding to the suspected abuse or exploitation must be developed.

Screening for exploitation and abuse is important and must be thoughtfully implemented, using validated evidence-based or evidence-informed tools whenever possible. Screening must be accompanied by access to resources for those who have experienced or are at risk for exploitation/abuse. When validated tools are not available, screening may involve asking open-ended questions about risk factors and migration experiences, using a trauma-informed approach, and/or providing a brief education to children and caregivers about exploitation/abuse with access to resources. Comprehensive healthcare protocols should be developed, implemented, and evaluated to assist professionals in the identification of and response to suspected abuse or exploitation. These protocols should be tailored to the needs of the health/mental health facility and should include coordination with multidisciplinary teams in order to meet the diverse needs of the children served.

ICMEC created a toolkit to assist medical and mental health professionals, health administrators, government officials, shelter staff, and other care providers in assessing and improving health care services available to trafficked children and adults, either on-site at their own organization, or at one or more local facilities (‘referral network’). The Improving Healthcare Services for Trafficked Persons toolkit includes an assessment tool to identify strengths and gaps in services within an existing facility, as well as resources for addressing challenges and improving services. This toolkit is available on our website at www.icmek.org.

In addition to the toolkit, ICMEC developed a How-To Guide to Develop a Healthcare Protocol for Responding to Child Trafficking/Exploitation—a brief online curriculum to guide professionals through the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating a protocol tailored to meet the needs of their health/mental health facility. The curriculum—containing over 40 resources to assist in protocol development—is available on our Health Portal.
Data should be collected, and research conducted to fully understand the prevalence of abuse and exploitation of children within mass movement and develop response mechanisms to create a safety net for children in migration.

The public health approach to human trafficking is founded on a rigorous, scientific evidence base, which requires research on risk and protective factors, exploitation experiences, health and mental health needs, and effective treatment strategies. Widespread recognition of the intersection of the exploitation of children and children who are missing from care cannot be achieved without data that is demonstrative of the link between and prevalence of these issues. Prioritizing the collection of data can ensure that the strategies being developed are reflective of the actual problems children on the move are facing. Useful policies and tools cannot be developed without a comprehensive understanding of what kind of abuse and exploitation children in mass movements experience, how it affects them in both the short- and long-term, and the circumstances in which children go missing.

Interagency cooperation must be established to care for every child including unaccompanied minors, children with special needs, trafficked children, and children formerly in institutions.

During times of crisis and mass migration, a child will, at different times, come into contact with a variety of agencies and organizations tasked with registering and processing them, providing them with basic needs, and planning for short-term accommodations and long-term integration. Each of these agencies and organizations must establish procedures for sharing information across disciplines and sectors to ensure that the location and wellbeing of the child is known at all times. Interagency collaboration is facilitated by the development of memoranda of understanding and written protocols outlining the roles and responsibilities for each organization. Cross-training of professionals is extremely helpful, as are regular meetings of an established multidisciplinary team.

At least 100 countries around the world are known to detain children for migration-related reasons.

UNICEF, Beyond Borders, Dec. 2017
11 Collaboration between law enforcement officials and migrant-focused organizations must be promoted to facilitate the protection of, and search for, missing children.

Collaboration across industry partners and the formulation of new relationships with key stakeholders can build trust and engagement, and promote the sharing of relevant tools, good practices, and information to ensure improvements in child protection. It can also contribute to the rapid reunification of children separated from caregivers during the migration journey.

12 Free accessible reporting mechanisms should be developed and provided to ensure that the public is aware of the mechanism, encouraged to immediately report a case of a missing child, and clearly understands how to report a missing child.

Countries should have a mechanism in place that allows the public to easily report a missing child and provide leads on a case. This mechanism may be a dedicated toll-free telephone hotline and/or a simple website managed and maintained by law enforcement or by a non-governmental organization (NGO) working in conjunction with the responsible investigative agency. The mechanism should be sustainable with an ongoing government funding source if possible. It is further necessary that the public be informed and aware of the reporting mechanism and know how to submit a report of a missing child.

13 All intercountry adoptions should be suspended until the crisis is over.

Adoptions during times of crisis too often lead to irregular, unsupervised placements with adoptive families. These placements are not in the best interest of the child. In some cases, children who are separated from their parents during migration are assumed to be orphaned and placed for adoption. In other cases, irregular adoption mechanisms result in a failure to follow proper processes and vetting of prospective adoptive parents. This may result in the child being placed with an individual who may traffic or otherwise exploit or abuse the child.

International adoption should not resume until there are sufficient resources and oversight to ensure that best practices can be followed. For adoptions that were already in process when the crisis began, the responsible adoption authority in the country where the child is currently residing must prohibit prospective adoptive parents from attempting to remove the child or taking other individual actions to secure physical custody of the child until all appropriate and legal processes and documentation are finalized.
14 Family reunification should be prioritized when in the best interest of the child.

Every effort must be made to locate, engage, and evaluate family members for every child arriving in a foreign country after forced or voluntary migration. During times of crisis, unaccompanied and/or separated children are often assumed to be orphaned or abandoned. In the vast majority of cases, this is not correct. Every effort must be made to ensure that there are technological resources available to be used to search for a child’s family, or for families to search for missing/separated children.

15 Established frameworks and guidelines should be implemented, and partnerships with organizations on the ground should encourage the use of the GMCNgine™.

It is important to implement established frameworks and guidelines such as ICMEC’s Model Missing Child Framework, the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) Paris Principles, and the Recommended Principles to Guide Actions Concerning Children on the Move and Other Children affected by Migration. By following established frameworks and guidelines for locating and recovering missing children, and utilizing technology and other targetted tools, we can ensure that children are reunited with their families quickly and safely.

The GMCNgine™, ICMEC’s web-based database and alerting system, is a technology tool that can be used reactively to alert the public of missing child cases, manage case information, and search for and locate missing children. As the largest missing child alerting system in the world, case managers have the ability to geo-target alerts to specific cities and regions. It can also be used proactively to register information about refugee children and the adults they are traveling with as they cross the border. To learn more about our GMCNgine, please visit our Global Missing Children’s Network. For more details about the GMCNgine’s case management capabilities, please view the brief GMCNgine promo video on ICMEC’s YouTube channel (youtube.com/c/DontYouForgetAboutMe).

1 in 8 international migrants is a child.

UNICEF, Child Migration, Apr. 2021
For more information, please see our publication:

**Protecting Children on the Move:**
**Understanding and Addressing the Risks of Abuse, Exploitation, and Going Missing during Migration (April 2022)**

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Children make up less than one third of the global population, but they were 50 per cent of the world’s refugees in 2019.

UNICEF, Child Displacement, Sep. 2021