

**More Than Just a Refugee: A Sustainable and Holistic Response to the Needs of  
Unaccompanied Minors in Greece**

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## **List of Acronyms**

AMF: Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

CWLA: Child Welfare League of America

CRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children

EKKA: National Center for Social Solidarity (EKKA Greece)

EU: European Union

EMN: European Migrant Network

FRA: Agency for Fundamental Rights

FRS: First Reception Center

HRW: Human Rights Watch

IOM: International Organization for Migration

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

RYS: Refugee Youth Service

UASC: Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

UAM: Unaccompanied minor

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees

UNICEF: United Nations International Emergency Fund

## 1. Personal Encounter

One hot and humid Tuesday evening in Athens, I found myself at a café in Omonia Square for almost two hours. Sitting outside drinking my Diet Coke, I was enveloped in cigarette smoke from other café diners. The smell of smoke bothered me, but I found myself transfixed, unable to move. I was both fascinated and horrified by what I was seeing happen around me. I was sitting in one of the busiest squares in Athens, just yards from Omonia station, and many people were passing by me: tourists getting off the open-top tour buses, business people rushing home from work, shoppers heading to the stores. It all looked very normal, but as the sun began to set, there was something happening that was disturbing and unsettling.

Among the people coming and going I saw many young teenagers wandering the area, yet they never seemed to go anywhere as the Greek locals did. Instead, I saw them waiting around corners, sitting on ledges, circling the same area again and again. They had no joy in their eyes, they were not laughing, and they seemed only focused on one thing, which was getting the attention of the older men who were wandering around the square. Now and then I saw them approach these older men, or the older men approach them. These encounters did not resemble familiarity or friendship; they looked like business transactions.

During those two hours, I must have seen at least four older men take off with younger boys. At one stage I saw an older man standing among five young teenage boys, and he stayed with them for at least thirty minutes. I could not hear the conversation he was having with them, but I saw his interactions and the way he touched these boys. He was touching their faces, their chests, and their buttocks, making gestures about shaving, walking with them to places around the square, introducing them to other men and handing them money. This man eventually came over to a young man near me who said “no” and shook his head. The older man persisted and

started to get angry. He spoke very sternly to the young man and finally coerced the teenager to go with him. Another young man, so thin his collar bones protruded, wandered past the cafe at least five times. The last time he walked past, some expensively-dressed older men had just arrived. They asked him to sit with them. They fed him and then left, taking him with them.

It was this evening spent at a café in Omonia Square that broke my heart and spurred me to research the plight of unaccompanied minors in Greece. Unaccompanied minors are often the forgotten ones in the refugee crisis, slipping through support mechanisms and getting erased by overwhelming and impersonal statistics. My experience in Omonia Square reminded me that they are more than just a statistic; they are real people, with real stories, experiencing real heartbreak. Focusing on their real needs and real value as people led me to explore sustainable and effective ways to assist them.

## **2. Introduction**

According to the UNHCR *Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum*, an unaccompanied minor is:

a person who is under the age of eighteen, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is, [sic] attained earlier and who is “separated [sic] from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1)

In Greece, unaccompanied refugee and migrant minors are among the most vulnerable individuals in the asylum-seeking community. Having arrived at their destination, many still face sexual exploitation, trauma, and hardship. Organizations seeking to work with unaccompanied minors must seek to create safe and sustainable housing, reliable sources of income and

education, and responses to their psychosocial needs. This thesis will propose a sustainable and holistic model for increasing prevention of and protection from the sexual exploitation, trauma, and hardship facing unaccompanied refugee and migrant minors in Greece. This model considers that these children and young people are not statistics, numbers, or even “just” refugees, but that they are children and young people with names and with families, who deserve a future of hopes, dreams, and opportunity. This thesis also serves as a call to social action and justice-seeking on behalf of unaccompanied minors by allowing the reader to have a fuller understanding of the enormity of the problem and of potential responses to it.

Where there are conflicts or war, religious persecution, or poverty, it is common for people to flee in search of a better and safer life. Among those embarking on this search for safety and a better future are children and young people who arrive in Europe with no parents, relatives, legal guardians, or other responsible adults. Most have endured journeys that have included traffickers, people smugglers, and treacherous terrain. Many have had to embark on a dangerous journey between Greece and Turkey across the unforgiving Aegean Sea. Their journeys have been traumatic and filled with loss.

A report on Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children co-produced by UNHCR, IOM, and UNICEF revealed that more than "16,500 children arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Spain in the first six months of 2017 of whom more than 11,900 (72%) were unaccompanied and separated children” (*Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe* 1). This staggering statistic reveals the extent of the refugee crisis that is occurring all over Europe. According to EKKA Greece, there are presently “3,700 unaccompanied minors in Greece with more than 2,300 living in precarious conditions” (E.K.K.A.). Many of these minors have endured horrific and traumatic journeys, only to find themselves in Greece without shelter, protection, or the means to survive.

They find themselves facing an asylum process with chaotic and slow processing systems, and dwindling resources and funding. There is also the issue of limited spaces available in shelters and the increase in the number of minors being held in detention centers.

These broken systems are leaving many unaccompanied minors vulnerable and at risk. Hallex Nyame argues that "whether they carry the status as refugee, internally displaced, asylum seeker or stateless, children are at a greater risk of abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, trafficking or forced military recruitment" (11). Unless the needs of unaccompanied minors are approached in a humane manner, there will remain an extensive underclass of poor, displaced persons within Greek society. A whole generation of young people will be limited in their ability to fully engage as effective citizens due to trauma and mental health issues, homelessness, social exclusion and isolation, and generational poverty. This is an inhumane situation that needs to be addressed today so these young people can experience quality of life in their new environment now and into the future.

This thesis offers a qualitative examination of the needs described above. It draws on my fieldwork and interviews undertaken in Athens, Greece, in November 2018, during which I met with refugees, asylum seekers, Greek locals, and various NGO employees. I spent my days and evenings learning about the refugee situation in Greece, both past and present, with most of my time being spent discussing and being educated on the specific situation of unaccompanied minors in Greece. Both my fieldwork experience in Greece and two previous mission trips to Greece sparked within me a deep desire to be an advocate for unaccompanied minors. I have been a witness to some of the horrors they face and have heard some of personal their stories and knew that I could not stand by in silence. This thesis is my contribution to the conversation and



part of my effort to create positive change. Addressing injustices, advocating on behalf of others, and helping to bring transformation to a world that is broken is what motivates this work.

### **3. The Problem: Context**

#### **Contextual and Historical Background of the European Refugee Crisis**

In late 2015, images of a drowned three-year-old showed up on the pages of every leading newspaper and news station globally. Alan Kurdi, a refugee of Syria, had washed up on the shores of a Turkish beach (Walsh). Alan's father had lost his two sons and his wife in one day (Kuntz). The tragedy of this circumstance opened the eyes of the world to the human suffering facing millions of refugees as they attempt to reach safe lands. Filmmaker Ken Burns, responding to the appalling photograph, observed that "The power of the single image to convey complex information is still there. It has that power to shock and arrest us. To make us stop for just a second and interrupt the flow" (qtd. in Bauman 1). The Alan Kurdi photograph certainly shocked people all over the globe and caused them to stop and consider the plight of refugees and the scope of this crisis.

The 1951 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Convention produced a key legal document that forms the basis for work with refugees around the world today. One hundred forty-five state parties ratified the document, which defines a refugee as someone who,

...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable

or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (*Convention & Protocol Relating to Status of Refugees* 14)

The UNHCR states in one of their latest fact sheets on Greece that as of 2018 there are “over sixty million displaced refugees worldwide - the highest number ever recorded, and one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum” (“Greece”). We are now living at a time in which we are witness to “the highest influx of refugees since World War II” (Albassam). Political unrest, violence, war, famine, conflict, and persecution around the world have caused displacement and the need for people to seek safety and refuge in places other than their home countries.

The media engagement around Alan Kurdi's drowning in 2015 alerted people worldwide to the tragedies facing displaced people, yet this crisis didn't begin in 2015; it began five years earlier in 2010 with the Arab Spring uprisings. The Arab Spring uprisings were a “series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East” (Manfreda) and reached Syria in 2011 as that nation's people began to protest the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. There was a brutal and violent response by President Bashar al-Assad to the generally peaceful protests, and the country was dragged into a full-scale civil war (Manfreda). The war in Syria became the “world's single-largest driver of displacement” (*World at War*). World Vision discloses that “more than 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees, and another 6.2 million people are displaced within Syria. Half of the people affected are children” (World Vision Staff). This is a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions with many, many lives being affected.

Syria is not the only country that has contributed to this worldwide refugee crisis, with conflicts erupting in Africa, the Middle East and in Europe. The UNHCR's report "Worldwide Displacement Hits All-Time High as War and Persecution Increase" states that,

In region after region, the number of refugees and internally displaced people are on the rise. In the past five years, at least 15 conflicts have erupted or reignited: eight in Africa (Côte d'Ivoire, Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, northeastern Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and this year in Burundi); three in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, and Yemen); one in Europe (Ukraine) and three in Asia (Kyrgyzstan, and in several areas of Myanmar and Pakistan).

Since 2001 there has also been continuous political unrest, instability, religious persecution, and conflict in Afghanistan contributing to the rising number of people seeking safety in foreign lands.

The majority of these refugees, desperate for safety, endure treacherous and life-threatening journeys through woods, mountains, and darkness, encountering dangerous checkpoints and illegal people smugglers along the way. They experience hunger, thirst, and tiredness. They climb onto boats meant for ten people, yet filled with eighty (Peter). They set sail on dangerous seas including the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea, with many ending up on the shores and islands of Greece.

By the time Alan Kurdi was found washed up on the shore, there were 19.5 million refugees worldwide, more than half of them children like him. A crisis of vulnerable young lives was well underway.

## The Current Situation in Europe

In 2019, more than three and half years after “the highest influx of asylum seekers and refugees since World War Two” (Albassam), there are still thousands upon thousands of people trying to reach safe shores, with thousands still facing dangerous and desperate journeys. The UNHCR share in their executive report *Desperate Journeys* the harsh reality that while arrival numbers in 2018 were down compared to the “large numbers who reached Italy each year between 2014-2017 or Greece in 2015, the journeys were as dangerous as ever. An estimated 2,275 people perished in the Mediterranean in 2018 – an average of six deaths every day” (4). It is believed that the high number of refugee deaths at sea is not likely to change even with the “2016 EU deal with Turkey, new border fences in the Balkans, and the 2017 bilateral arrangement between Italy and Libya” (Henley). The *Desperate Journeys* report goes on to state that “most of these trends look set to continue in 2019, with the root causes of displacement and migratory movements – such as human rights violations and conflict or poverty – remaining unresolved” (4).

The following statistics from the UNHCR provide a breakdown of arrivals since 2014:

Previous years	Arrivals *	Dead and missing
2018	139,300	2,275
2017	172,324	3,139
2016	363,425	5,096
2015	1,015,877	3,771
2014	215,690	3,538

\* Arrivals in 2018 include land and sea arrivals to Spain and Greece. In addition, 2,211 people arrived in Cyprus and Malta. Arrivals in 2017 and before are sea arrivals only.

As of January 2019, there have already been 4,527 new refugee arrivals in Europe (UNHCR “Mediterranean Situation”), so by no means has this crisis ended.

### **The Greek Context**

Greece became one of the central arrival locations for refugees early in this crisis with the Greek islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros, and Kos becoming the “first point of arrival in Europe for the million-plus refugees that have arrived in Greece from Turkey” (Owens). By 2015, “over 338,000 refugees and migrants are estimated to have entered Greece by sea” (Zafiropoulos). Greece was the gateway to Europe for thousands of refugees, particularly those from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran. From Greece, they would attempt to travel through Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary to get to other destinations in Europe. In March 2016, the borders of Macedonia closed and thousands of refugees were left stranded in Greece (Galinou). This situation hit Greece against the backdrop of a severe financial crisis. Simon Dawson of *The Financial Post* reported in 2012 that “Greece's economy has contracted every quarter for four years, and one in four Greeks is jobless. Austerity measures have cut public employee salaries and benefits, reduced government services and raised taxes” (Dawson). This financial crisis brought Greece to its knees, with the middle class being almost completely wiped out.

The combination of both an economic and refugee crisis created tension and despair for many. Here was a country that was already on the brink of financial ruin when thousands of helpless and desperate people landed on its shores and moved into its cities. There were not enough resources available for the newcomers or their Greek neighbors. Not surprisingly, this situation led to the rise of anti-immigrant political parties that stood behind slogans like "Greece for Greeks" and blamed the economic troubles on refugees and immigrants. The toxic combination of financial strain and immigrant influx is still ongoing (Henley).

According to the latest statistics gathered by the UNHCR, there are 71,200 refugees and asylum seekers in Greece, 14,600 on the islands and 56,600 in the mainland (“Greece” 1). They are scattered through various UNHRC settlement camps and other locations around the country. The number of refugees and asylum seekers still in Greece only add to the ongoing tension between locals and those seeking refuge.

### **Unaccompanied Refugee and Migrant Minors**

Unaccompanied refugee and migrant minors do not decide to become refugees because it is an easy option. Parents do not decide to send their children away from home because they are unwanted. People who are caught in wars, bombings, horrendous violence, and persecution are forced to make one of two choices: stay and face injury, death, persecution, and loss of security, work, home, or family; or go and face danger, injury, death, exploitation, oppression, and loss of possessions and family. It is often a choice between known despair or farsighted hope, between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between danger and deprivation at home with family and friends or a potentially dangerous and uncertain future on dangerous seas and in unsafe refugee camps. Seth Holmes shares in his book *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* that “crossing the border is not a choice to engage in a risk behavior but rather a process necessary to survive, to make life less risky” (21). As poet Warsan Shire puts it in her spoken poem “Home,” many decide to leave because “anywhere is safer than here” (Shire).

Unaccompanied minors each present unique narratives and motivations for having to leave their home countries. The journeys they have had to undertake are diverse and distinct to them but all distressing, according to Levinson:

Unaccompanied children may arrive clandestinely, hidden by traffickers or paid smugglers, or they may attempt to migrate through regular immigration checkpoints.

They may present false documents to border officials or arrive in desperation with no documents at all. They may be apprehended while trying to enter the destination country or evade border patrols altogether.

This refugee crisis is prompting not only desperate adults but also their children to make desperate choices and embark on desperate journeys, many of them alone.

I remember so clearly a woman I met one Thursday morning at the Salvation Army day center in Athens. I recall she had two babies on her hip; the younger would giggle if you smiled at her. The woman looked young but weary, as though she had lived a thousand lives already. She sat to the left of me and together we chose a muted pink polish for her fingernails. The volunteer on her right painted her nails while I played with her two-year-old daughter and kept her giggling. In broken English, we talked about her children. I commented on their beauty and their sweet spirits. “Shabana”<sup>1</sup> told me she had two more children, but they were not with her in Greece. She had to flee Afghanistan after the Taliban killed her husband. One of her daughters who was ten years old was left at home in Afghanistan with another family in hopes she would be safe with them; she showed me a picture of a beautiful little girl posing in front of a tent. Another daughter, twelve years old was sent to Germany by herself. “Shabana” voiced her predicament to me “I had no other option; I wanted her to be safe, I wanted her to have a future” (Shabana). As she spoke, she began to tear up; she told me she had not heard from the daughter in Germany in a long time: “I worry for her; I don't know if she is okay. I can only pray.” She showed me more pictures of her girls and began to cry. Shabana told me she wanted her story to be shared so that people will know the truth (Shabana).

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<sup>1</sup> “Shabana” is a pseudonym. My interviewee feared for the safety of herself and her children and did not wish to give her real name.

Children migrate by themselves for the very same reason that adults do. They are fleeing war, religious persecution, danger, bombing, and violence. Some are escaping poverty, trafficking or slavery. Some of them are searching for parents or family who are living in other parts of the world. In some cases, their parents send them off in hopes they will find a safer place to live and in hopes of giving them a future, as illustrated in Shabana's story above. Kenneth Miller describes the often painful and distressing situations faced by families:

Some children are sent on by parents unable to leave themselves, an agonizing decision for parents who can only hope their child will find a haven in a far-off land. Other children start out together with their families, but through a host of circumstances, end up getting separated from them and must make their way alone or with others they encounter along the way.

Children whom the United Nations' *Convention of Rights of the Child* indicate should be attending school with protection of their human rights are instead walking through "miles of treacherous terrain at night, hiding in wet grass or on stony ground to avoid discovery, passing through guarded checkpoints, and being smuggled onto overcrowded boats" (Peter).

The *Desperate Journeys* report by UNHCR shared that in 2018, ...over 1,900 unaccompanied children arrived by sea with most from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria.... of the 3,700 unaccompanied children in Greece, only one in three was in appropriate care arrangements, mainly in shelters. Nearly 750 unaccompanied children were homeless or missing. (25)

The global narrative of unaccompanied minors as cast away or unwanted children is not reflective of either experience or research. They are often deeply loved and cared for by family.



They are children who are being sent toward the unknown to escape the horror and danger of the known.

Regardless of the causes of their being there, however, all 3,700 unaccompanied minors need basic human services and protection. While we are beginning to understand why children are being sent on journeys alone, the question remains, how might a humanitarian and missional response to their circumstances be brought about?

### **Rights of Children and Refugee Law**

Laws for the protection of children, and indeed conceptions of childhood itself as we know it in the West today, were largely nonexistent up until the nineteenth century. It was early in the that century when children began to be recognized as a people group worth protecting. During this time, various laws were passed in Europe to help regulate child labor and to encourage the education of children. It was also a time when society began to recognize that “the child could not be dealt with in the same way as an adult” (“History of the Rights of the Child”). In 1919, the League of Nations formed a committee focused on the protection of children. Five years later the Geneva Declaration was adopted, solidifying international understanding of the rights of children (“History of the Rights of the Child”). These changes, although not perfect, set the stage for greater protection for children.

A watershed moment came on December 2, 1938, when 200 children made their way to the UK and over the “following nine months 10,000 unaccompanied, mainly Jewish children traveled to safety in the UK” (The Weiner Library). Kindertransport, as this effort became known, involved the rescue of Jewish unaccompanied minors from countries within Europe such as Germany, Austria, Poland beginning in December 1938 (The Weiner Library). This rescue

didn't create new policy, but it did help to foster a new sense of social responsibility for the welfare and rights of children.

After the Second World War, children's rights as a fixed and legislated concept went through several key stages following the creation of the United Nations and as new developments in the care of children took place. These stages as explained by BICE are as follows:

- 1948: The United Nations adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates that motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance.
- 1951: The UN adopts the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention).
- 1959: The UN adopts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which recognized the child as a subject of special rights.
- 1979: UNESCO declared the International Year of the Child. ("History of the Rights of the Child")

These declarations and conventions were an extension of the shift in how children were recognized in civilized culture, and were a call to action for significant changes in the way that children were regarded in times and places of crisis. This era of compassionate policy development established the rights and protections that are afforded to children today.

Other significant pieces of legislation that speak to the protection and care and guardianship of children, as noted by UNICEF in its summary on the *Convention of the Rights of Child*, include the following:

- the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and its two Optional Protocols (2000);
- the four Geneva Conventions (1949) and their two Additional Protocols (1977); and

- the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and its Protocol (1967). (“Fact Sheet: A Summary of the Rights Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child” 18)

Marjatta Bardy explains that the Convention on the Rights of the Child functions as “a suggested ‘contract’ between the child and adult generations, as a desired model where children have access to resources, they are protected, and they are allowed to participate. The contract is built upon the three hard P’s; provision, protection, and participation” (Bardy). Provision, protection and participation are legitimate rights and must form the basis for work being done with children and unaccompanied minors today.

Over the years, additional international, regional, and national laws and policies have been put in place to protect the rights of children. In a report called *Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, the International Committee of the Red Cross shares that some of these rights include the following:

- the right to a name, legal identity and birth registration;
- the right to physical and legal protection;
- the right not to be separated from their parents;
- the right to provisions for their basic subsistence;
- the right to care and assistance appropriate to their age and developmental needs; and
- the right to participate in decisions about their future. (International Committee of the Red Cross)

Commonly it is the responsibility of parents, family, and community to support and protect children. However, when there is no family, the larger community must ensure via international, national, and local authorities that children’s rights are respected.

A review of current protections for children and of the development of those protections is instrumental to modern responses to the refugee crisis, given the recent statistic that children make up just over half of the world's refugees (UNHCR "Voices in the Dark – Children on the Run" 0:50). This number includes both children who are accompanied by parents and those who travel alone. Children have become the most vulnerable people group in this crisis, and it is essential that humanitarian organizations safeguard all children who come into their care. As the Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Interim Director Constantinos Manolopoulos explains,

The plight of the many seeking refuge in the EU needs resolving urgently. This applies to children in particular, many of whom are without parental care and are at risk of becoming victims of abuse, exploitation or trafficking. We must ensure that all children, particularly those without parental supervision, receive international protection and are safe from those who violate their rights and deprive them of their childhood. Ultimately, it should be remembered that children, no matter their status, are children after all and should be treated as such. (FRA)

It is imperative that the care of unaccompanied minors remains a top priority and that laws and legislation written for their protection not only remain in place but are followed. Sadly, this crisis has laid bare how scarce the resources are to fulfill these responsibilities. The reality is that children have been placed in desperate circumstances and that many countries have failed to act humanely or legally. If there is to be a humanitarian response to this crisis, first and foremost it must redress the rights of the child.

#### 4. Asylum Process in Greece

The legislation available should mean uniform standards are applied at each entry point into the EU including Greece. It should mean that when dealing with unaccompanied minors there are processes in place to afford them immediate protection and care. Yet what has been revealed over the years is that the process is anything but uniform and that unaccompanied minors are not being treated as they should be. Practices and policies are employed differently in each member state, and this reality has caused significant problems in the care and protection of unaccompanied minors.

At the core of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights* and the *1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and its *1967 Protocol* is the right to asylum. The EU too has laws and legislation in place that emphasize this right. The EU's *Status of Unaccompanied Children Arriving at the EU Borders*, which lays out EU laws and legislation for unaccompanied minors, shares that, "EU asylum law applies to unaccompanied children from the time they arrive at the EU borders. At that point, minors must be able to apply for international protection. Minors have the right to representation" (1). Also, according to EU law,

Minors are entitled to remain in the territory of the host state until a final decision is made on their status. Reception centers for minors must be suitable to their needs and be separate from adults. The detention of a minor is allowed only as a last resort. Those who qualify for refugee status are given refugee status, provided that they meet the criteria of the EU asylum legislation. Minors who do not otherwise qualify for refugee status may be granted subsidiary status if they face a real risk of suffering serious harm upon return to their country of origin. A residence permit and travel documents are given to minors who are recognized refugees or accorded subsidiary protection. They also have access to

education, health care, and medical care. Unaccompanied minors who are recognized as refugees by national authorities have the right to bring their family members into the host country. (1)

It is very clear that the law is on the side of unaccompanied minors. The protections described above have been put in place to ensure that children are kept safe and looked after. When dealing with unaccompanied minors wanting to enter their borders, EU Members are required to act in the best interests of the child.

Protecting refugee children is high on the agenda for the UNHCR, and this can be seen with the following list of revised legislation providing a legal precedent for how Greece should deal with current refugee and asylum-seeking persons. Each document listed by European Migration Network not only lays out legal requirements for protecting unaccompanied minors but also expands on the reasons why unaccompanied minors should be protected:

- The revised Asylum Procedures Directive (2013/32/EU recast),
- The revised Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU recast),
- The revised Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU),
- The revised Dublin Regulation (604/2013),
- The Anti-trafficking Directive (2011/36/EU). (European Migration Network 9)

According to the above-mentioned laws, and as recommended by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, the standard practice for the treatment of unaccompanied minors should include the following:

- Representation on behalf of the unaccompanied minor;

- Placement of unaccompanied minors with adult relatives, with a foster family, in accommodation centers with special provisions for minors or in other suitable accommodation;
- Attempts to trace the unaccompanied minors' family members as quickly as possible;
- Appropriate training for anybody working with unaccompanied minors;
- Due account of family unity, welfare and social development of the unaccompanied minor, as well as his/her safety and opinion, taken when assessing the best interests of the child;
- Consider unaccompanied minors as being children before being migrants.
- Prior to deciding on the return of an unaccompanied minor, provide him/her with assistance by appropriate bodies other than the authorities enforcing return.
- Before removing an unaccompanied minor, ensure that s/he will be returned to a member of his/her family, a nominated guardian or adequate reception facilities.
- Unaccompanied minors shall only be detained as a measure of last resort and for as short a period of time as possible in institutions that take into account the needs of persons of their age.
- Border guards must pay particular attention to minors and be child sensitive. (FRA)

Following these procedures is critical to increase protection for unaccompanied minors and to facilitate a more humane response to refugees and unaccompanied minors.

Sadly, those working with unaccompanied minors notice over and over again that even with all the laws and legislation in place, thousands of children are still homeless, still unprotected, and still lacking their basic needs. Both the FRA and UNICEF believe that the current legislation is of itself not enough and that the care and protection of unaccompanied

minors have not been handled well. UNICEF has called on countries where children have sought refuge to do better, stating that unaccompanied minors have been left to "languish in overcrowded shelters, end up in makeshift camps or are left exposed to the dangers of life on the streets" ("UNICEF: Number of Unaccompanied Refugee Children Soars"). It has become apparent that local, national and international agencies and governments are not following the guidelines set out for them and are therefore not meeting the requirements for proper care and protection of unaccompanied minors.

### **Registration**

A significant portion of Greece's border faces the sea. This creates many entry points through which refugees fleeing north and west can enter. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that those attempting to enter Greece are usually detected by either "the Hellenic Police, responsible for border management, or by the Hellenic Coastguard, responsible for policing Greek territorial waters and search and rescue missions" (International Organization for Migration Office in Greece). Once refugees and asylum seekers have been detected or picked up by authorities, they are sent for screening at the various operational centers or mobile units run by First Reception Service of the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reform (FRS). The purpose of the FRS is to carry out registration procedures with the help of either the Hellenic coastguard or police; the authority that ends up in charge depends upon the refugees' entry point. These first response locations are where unaccompanied minors are registered and where further examinations are performed by authorities, particularly for those whose age is in question.

All those entering Greece who identify as an unaccompanied minor must be reported to the Greek authority called Prosecutor for Minors, which then becomes the official interim guardian for the minor (IOM). At this stage they are also referred for accommodation to the



Ministry of Labor (IOM). While waiting for accommodation to become available, they are sent to reception centers to sleep and to undergo further medical tests. If these reception and identification centers are full, unaccompanied minors are held in prison-like detention centers.

The stark reality is that when unaccompanied minors arrive in Greece, they not only must navigate a complicated legal framework that is continually changing but also are faced with a system that is increasingly fraught with resource shortages so that even the most basic of needs are absent. Major Ethan Frizzell, a policy expert within The Salvation Army, told me about what he sees as,

...an unfortunate reoccurrence of policy and process. The policy increases the protection, but there are not funds for the process to be experienced. The right policies are in place but they are not resourced for action, thus extending and sometimes furthering the harm the policy was supposed to protect against.

(Frizzell)

When there are no resources or limited resources available, the legal protection that is these young people's right does not always translate into actual protection or care, and the systems that are in place are often inadequate and strained to breaking point. This creates difficulties throughout their journey beginning with registration.

Since registration is one of the first things to happen, when done incorrectly or carelessly it can create all kinds of future problems for unaccompanied minors. In their article "Unaccompanied Minors in Greece: Who Can 'Save' Them?" Fili and Xythali confirm the problems encountered by unaccompanied minors at registration:

Although there is a clear definition in law of who can be considered unaccompanied or separated, for a number of years the police at the borders

have employed random registering practices which have caused problems in the identification of minors as unaccompanied, highlighting at the same time how children circulate out of and beyond secure spaces. Firstly, it is common practice for authorities to arbitrarily register minors as unaccompanied even when they are travelling with members of their extended family, leading to their forceful separation. On the other hand, on occasions minors have been classified at entry points as accompanied by non-related adults, presumably to avoid congestion in registration centers on the islands. (Fili and Xythali)

The registration process in Greece is said to be chaotic, the decision making arbitrary, and the systems in place inadequate to deal with the many complications associated with registering unaccompanied minors. Greece has an antiquated registration process that cannot and has not kept up with the unique needs of this group of people which only adds further stress, confusion and unsafe conditions for unaccompanied minors, who are already on edge and overwhelmed.

Another issue that adds further strain to this process is that some unaccompanied minors avoid the registration process altogether or lie about their age because they don't want to be sent to the reception centers. Jessica Webster, founder of Forge for Humanity in Athens, shared with me that in her experience, "many unaccompanied minors don't want to be registered because they will then be placed within the system and have restrictions put upon them. A lot of them want to go to other countries and not end up in Greece" (Webster).

IOM confirm this practice and acknowledges the difficulties this creates for unaccompanied minors: "As a result, the wrong date of birth may accompany the child throughout his/her stay in Greece and automatically place him/her outside of any protection mechanism and environment, with all the respective outcomes" (International Organization for

Migration Office in Greece). By evading registration, unaccompanied children end up being invisible within the system, vulnerable to exploitation, and exposed to danger and risk.

It is more than likely that if unaccompanied minors face difficulties or errors upon their arrival and registration, those difficulties will impact the rest of their journey in Greece and make it very difficult for them to get settled or to move on to another destination. Lack of registration also changes their status to illegal, which means there are no protections in place for them at all.

### **Accommodation**

Unaccompanied minors not only deal with this broken and chaotic registration process, but also face a shortage of suitable accommodation once registered. They are by law entitled to care and protection from Greek authorities; however, as reported by Human Rights Watch, “Greece has a chronic shortage of suitable accommodation and lacks a comprehensive protection system for child asylum seekers and migrants” (“Why Are You Keeping Me Here?”). No amount of legislation can make up for this lack of available resources. As of January 31, 2019, there were 3,718 unaccompanied minors in Greece and 2,137 of them were on a waiting list for safe and secure accommodation (E.K.K.A.).

There are two primary types of sites at which unaccompanied minors seek accommodation: these are (1) the reception and identification centers on the islands and (2) shelters in the mainland. Each type of accommodation currently presents challenges and dangers to unaccompanied minors.

#### *Reception and Identification Centers*

The reception and identification centers (RICs) are supposed to be a safe and protective environment but are often the exact opposite of safe. In her article for the *Hopkins Bloomberg*

*Public Health Magazine*, Divya Mishra shares the story of 16-year-old Fayaz, who was kept for four months in a reception and identification center for UAMs at Camp Moria on Lesbos:

Surrounded on all sides with a barbed wire fence, the four rows of white shipping containers housed dozens of children who slept on bunkbeds. Greek police were stationed at the gate to keep the children in, and Moria's adult refugees out. Children were left essentially unsupervised at night. "We lived like prisoners," [Fayaz] recalls bitterly.

(Mishra)

It is no wonder that many unaccompanied minors run away or choose to evade the system when faced with conditions such as these. According to Greek law, unaccompanied minors can only be held in these centers for up to 45 days. If they are waiting to go to a shelter, they can only be held for 25 days ("Why Are You Keeping Me Here"). Yet as Mishra goes on to report, there are "minors who have been in a RIC for more than six months, maybe more than a year, and they're not sure if there is an exit" (Mishra). The delayed transfer of unaccompanied minors to safe and secure accommodation adds danger and trauma for children who have already experienced both.

Citing a 2017 report by Human Rights Watch, an article by the *Daily Sabah* charges that "children on the Greek island of Lesbos are being exposed to squalid living conditions and degrading humanitarian treatment, including overcrowded facilities, inadequate sanitation and frequent incidents of violence" ("Greece Fails to Protect Unaccompanied Migrant Minors"). It is obvious that Greece is failing these unaccompanied minors by falling short in providing the services they need and have a right to. This treatment of children goes against Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself" (The United Nations).

*Mainland Accommodation*

Unaccompanied minors who move on, run away, or completely avoid the chronically under-resourced RICs eventually end up on the mainland in one of the larger Greek cities like Athens. They may be fortunate enough to find a bed in one of the shelters made up of hotels, houses, or apartments managed by NGOs (Mishra), but the reality is that even on the mainland there is still a chronic accommodation shortage, and many unaccompanied minors find themselves once again without the help they need. This is especially true for unaccompanied minors who are older than fifteen.

Jonny Willis, the director of Velos Youth in Athens, testified that “Hundreds and hundreds of youth, especially [age] fifteen and up, are missing out on accommodation. Those who are in older age range always struggle to find a place to stay” (Willis). Statistics show that less than 5.3% of unaccompanied minors are fourteen years or younger. This means that the majority of unaccompanied minors are fifteen years and older. Therefore, if Jonny Willis is accurate in his assessment of those missing out on accommodation, we can assume that the majority of unaccompanied minors are without shelter and protection.

Jessica Webster of Forge for Humanity also noted the many difficulties facing unaccompanied minors when they arrive on the mainland: “Being an unaccompanied minor 15-18 years is pretty much like being an adult at this stage. There is no help or assistance and it is very difficult to access services; it is very hard to get housing or any other kind of support” (Webster). These same opinions on the difficulty unaccompanied minors face finding accommodation in Greece are echoed by Simone Manuel, youth worker from the organization Faros. Manuel disclosed, “We have had minors sleep in the front of our door. We have no room for them, but they sleep in the front of our door because they feel safer. Otherwise they would be

sleeping on the street or in the park” (Manuel). The situation for unaccompanied minors is woeful and has created a very uncertain and unsafe future for a group that is already vulnerable and at risk.

## **5. The People: Threats and Dangers Facing Unaccompanied Children in Greece**

Unaccompanied minors face many threats and dangers while trying to navigate the islands and streets of Greece. They are left vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence, they have ongoing trauma and mental health-related needs and concerns, they are often left isolated both culturally and socially, they miss out on important education, and many find themselves locked up in detention for extended periods of time. Unaccompanied minors are often left to navigate these threats and dangers by themselves and their lives are often at risk. What is often forgotten is that these are children, young people who should be at home playing with their friends, eating dinner with their families, and attending school; instead they are spending their days fighting to survive.

### **Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Violence**

In an article for *Spiegel Online*, Giorgos Christides makes the bleak claim that “On a square in Athens, unaccompanied boys from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria are increasingly pursuing a last-ditch option for survival: prostitution” (Christides). He expands on the plight of many unaccompanied minors as he tells the story of Mohammad:

Mohammad hasn't gone that far yet, but he says it is only a matter of time until he goes home with a man. He has just 30 euros left in his pocket, and he is quickly losing hope. "When this money runs out, I fear I will have no other choice but do what the others are doing. Have sex with these older men. What

should I do? I have no place to stay, nothing to eat. Should I just die in the park?" he says, finally bursting into tears. (Christides)

Mohammad's dilemma is tragically familiar for many young refugee boys who have ended up in Greece, and sadly, many of them have had to make the decision to sell themselves. What has become known as survival sex is exactly that, these boys' only means of surviving the streets of Greece.

I remember my closest encounter with this world so clearly; the image is forever seared in my mind. Our mission team had been in Athens six days already and we were staying at a hotel near Omonia Square, the square that is at the center of this tragedy. By this stage we had seen older men and younger boys walking the streets, hiding in alleyways, and exiting hotels all week. Yet this time it was different: it was my hotel and it was down the hall from my room and directly across the hall from my teammates. It was around 9:00 pm and we were getting ready to go to bed. I knocked on their door to discuss plans for the next morning, and while I was waiting, the door behind me opened. I turned around to see a young boy, maybe twelve years old. He looked pained and visibly upset. Behind him was a very old man, smiling. The young boy rushed out of that room as fast as he could and the older man left a few steps behind him. There was no sense of them being family or even friends. The young boy had a clear desire to leave this man and fast. They left the room door open. There was no luggage; the room was completely empty when I peeked in. I knew what had happened there without anyone having to tell me. It was written all over that young boy's face; the pain was clearly etched there. I burst into tears when my teammate opened the door.

What I caught a glimpse of that night in Athens is sadly the reality and personal story of many unaccompanied minors in Greece. Christides shares the example of Ahmad:

“My job in Athens for the past year and a half is to have sex for money,” says the thin boy, who speaks like an adult. “Life is hard and sometimes life makes people do hard things.” When he ran out of money in Athens, Ahmad says he faced three choices: sell drugs, join a smuggling ring or prostitution. He chose the latter. (Christides)

No young person should ever have to make this kind of decision. No young person should ever be put in this position and yet on a daily basis this is the exact position these young boys are placed in if they are to survive on the streets of Greece. For many they have no other options available to them. They cannot leave Greece without the correct paperwork, but they cannot stay without the means to eat and find shelter. It is like they are trapped in a never-ending cycle of despair and increasing vulnerability.

Not only does sexual exploitation happen on the Greek city streets and within its buildings, but there have also been many reports of sexual violence and abuse happening within the reception centers and camps. Due to the already dysfunctional protective and legal structures within the centers, the risk and opportunity for sexual violence among unaccompanied minors is particularly high. In a report for Harvard FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Vasileia Digidiki and Jacqueline Bhabha state that,

Unaccompanied children are at a heightened risk, as they can be victimized by adults and, for those held in detention facilities, by other unaccompanied children. The coexistence of dozens of children of various ages from different cultures and ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds creates significant power differentials. Research on sexual violence has shown that violence is a commonly used method to assert power and dominance in a social setting. (18)



Unaccompanied minors not only face the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse due to their vulnerability and need for basic necessities and shelter, but they also have to contend with the Governments unsafe practice of housing children of various ages, backgrounds and cultures together. The sharing of bathrooms and of cramped and often dark quarters with little to no supervision puts unaccompanied minors at risk of grooming, harassment, and exploitation. It is horrifying to think that children already traumatized, frightened, and in desperate need are subject to even greater tragedies.

It is illegal in Greece to sexually exploit children, as Greece is part of the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography* which requires member states to “criminalize transactional sex with children” (Freccero et al). Yet these activities continue, often right under the eyes of police. There were many times during my trips to Athens when I saw transactions being made and young boys being preyed upon, and each time police officers were in sight but did nothing to stop these things from happening.

Sexual exploitation, violence, and abuse is not only a human rights violation, but also a public health concern. Some of the health issues include “HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases and infections (STIs), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, substance use, cutting behaviors, and suicidal ideation” (Freccero et al.). Sadly, again, not much attention is being paid to this issue in Athens. The sexual exploitation, violence, and abuse of unaccompanied minors is not on the agenda of many people working in the field of refugees and unaccompanied minors.

## Trauma and Mental Health Issues

In his book *Social Exclusion, Compound Trauma and Recovery*, Peter Cockersell explains trauma as defined by,

...a ‘deeply distressing or disturbing experience’ or a ‘physical injury (medical)’ such as a ‘rupture’ or a ‘wound’; [the term] derives from the Greek word *trauma* that means wound. I think that the medical definition of trauma is useful because of the dual aspects of the words ‘rupture’ and ‘wound’: ‘rupture’ can be seen as the separation of one part from its relationship with another, and ‘wound’ as the breaking and penetration of a boundary. (26)

Thousands of unaccompanied minors in Greece are facing trauma on a daily basis, a trauma caused by deep ruptures and by separation in relationships with family, culture, and country. They are very much the walking wounded, with scars and wounds that nobody else can see but that are deep and painful.

Journalist Alexia Tsagkari tells of her meeting with “A”, who at 13 years old saw his parents murdered, and who was then sold into prostitution and slavery. Tsagkari heard his heartbreaking story, a story that is an echo of the traumatic experiences many unaccompanied minors endure on their way to Greece. “A”’s experiences reveal but a small level of the trauma these young people carry around. As Tsagkari tells it,

One day, guards at the mine caught his best friend trying to escape and killed him by setting him on fire, he said. Two years later, after several futile attempts, A managed to flee this hell. He made his way to Turkey, where he met a group of refugees who took him under their protection. They hid him in a packed dinghy and brought him to the Greek island of Lesbos.

“I was alone, and in the camp in Lesbos it was cold and we didn’t have blankets,” he told me. “I stayed there for some weeks – I don’t remember exactly. Until one day, the camp was set on fire. Other refugees and I managed to escape and hide in an abandoned building.” (Tsagkari)

This young man endured being trafficked and prostituted, watching family and friends being murdered, fleeing for his life, living on the streets, and being left alone. If this was a movie script, we would say it was unbelievable. Shockingly, this is not a movie; this is real life for so many in Greece.

It is not surprising after hearing these stories to discover that the majority of unaccompanied minors in Greece suffer from major depression, PTSD, anxiety, and anger, and that many self-harm (Tsagkari). Jessica Webster from Forge for Humanity confirms this: “We are not qualified in psychiatric care but I can tell you that we have seen a lot of self-harm over the last few years and spoken to many who no longer wish to live” (Webster). According to Mado Liadopoulou, a psychologist with the Greek organization Network for Children’s Rights, this self-harm usually reflects “despair or anger that needs to be externalized because the minor can’t bear his feelings and acts them out” (qtd. in Mishra).

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) lists some of the following trauma stressors facing unaccompanied minors along their journeys:

- Pre-Migration: Abandonment, gang violence, abuse and neglect, separation and grief,
- Migration during transit: Deprivation, accidental injuries, sexual/physical abuse, separation and grief, absence of attachment figures,
- Migration during resettlement: Detention, fear of deportation, safety issues,

- Post-Migration: Substandard living conditions, social isolation, discrimination, lack of social/community supports, fear of deportation. (“Addressing Trauma Needs of Minors”)

With all these stresses it is incredible that more unaccompanied minors have not taken their own lives. Thankfully they have not, and this speaks to their strength, courage, and resilience. It speaks to their bravery through the worst of circumstances. They have not given up on themselves and we must not give up on them either. We must make every effort to care for the mental health of unaccompanied minors, and it is essential that unaccompanied minors are offered appropriate trauma-centered care and counselling. Their mental health and their healing must be seen as a top priority.

### **Loss of Education**

Chaos, upheaval, uncertainty as to what the future holds, and the daily battle to survive make it almost impossible for unaccompanied minors to get the education they need. They have so many things to fight and contend against, and education is one of the first things to go. In the article “‘Without Education They Lose Their Future’: Denial of Education to Child Asylum Seekers on the Greek Islands,” Human Rights Watch cites a Greek ministerial expert committee which found that “a significant percentage of refugee children [in Greece] have been out of the school environment for at least two years, and many children have never attended school, although they are of school age” (“Without Education”). Bella Chaffey reports that “more than 1 in 5 school-aged children in Greek refugee camps have never been to school. The rest of them have been out of school for an average of 1.5 years and many of them cannot even hold a pencil” (Chaffey). Such gaps in or complete absence of education will affect greatly these children’s futures.

Greek laws allow for migrants and asylum seekers to attend public schools, but for those living in camps on the islands, there is no access to those schools, and there are few if any schools operating within the camps. Many unaccompanied minors on the mainland are unregistered, so access to school is not available to them.

This loss of education is a serious matter because for many it means the loss of future possibilities and opportunities, which can in turn mean the loss of hope. Education not only represents greater prospects for future employment, but it also keeps children occupied, it keeps their minds sharp, and it assists with socialization and integration into the Greek community. Without schooling, unaccompanied minors are roaming the streets with many getting involved with illegal activities, and they remain isolated, both socially and through language difficulties. This isolation can lead to gang activity and radicalization as they search out community. It is a downward spiral from lack of schooling to far greater tragedies.

Systems have to be put in place for unaccompanied minors who are not registered to still have access to education while they are living in Greece, whether on the islands or on the mainland. Imaginative approaches must be taken to ensure that they don't continue to miss out on their education. Every effort must be made to ensure that this vulnerable population with their unique needs and life situations can be catered to.

### **Cultural and Social Isolation**

Another hazard of being an unaccompanied minor is the cultural and social isolation that comes from being away from your home country and all that is familiar. A participant cited in the Faros report *Children on The Run* shared how he was sent to a shelter where there was no interpreter and no other children who spoke his language. He spoke of how frustrating it was to have no one to communicate with: "I felt lonely... 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” (Gkioka and Biswas 20). Already away from home, enduring difficult journeys, and facing incredible trauma, unaccompanied minors like this participant also have to deal with language barriers and a huge cultural gap in their new countries.

In his book *Forced Migration and Mental Health*, David Ingleby describes the typical experience of refugee women:

When arriving in the country of refuge, a number of issues impede the well-being and progress of refugee women. The combination of experienced loss, adaptational requirements and having to wait until her asylum claim is processed, make the person feel powerless. Seeking asylum entails losing her place in a society she used to fit in, where she knew her environment and was loved by the people around her, losing the meaningful relationships in her life and living through a great deal of fear and uncertainty. The person then ends up isolated in a strange country, where she does not speak the language and feels alienated and shocked by some of the values and codes of behavior. The uncertainties experienced throughout this stage can cause the person to feel futile and powerless. (2661)

Although he is talking about adult refugee women here, his description fits the realities of many unaccompanied minors. They too experience this sense of isolation and of being alone, of losing their cultural identity, and of being thrown into an environment completely unfamiliar culturally—all without a social support system to help them cope.

Not only is the culture unaccompanied minors find themselves in an unfamiliar one; it can also be an unfriendly one. When I was in Athens, I became very quickly aware of a ranking system among the refugees and asylum seekers. Those from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran were at the top; they were able to receive the most help and were generally accepted and cared for in Athens. They were seen for the most part as being genuine refugees. At the bottom of the list were people from Pakistan and Africa, with the people from Pakistan being the lowest. Refugees from these countries were not seen as not being legitimate refugees. It was believed by locals that they had left their countries for economic reasons instead of violence, war, or the threat of death. Their claims for asylum were often denied, and this only added to the negative way they were perceived.

These prejudices and stereotypes meant that unaccompanied minors were not exempt from racist attacks or attitudes. In an article on migration and cultural identity, Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew Becker describe the effect on an individual facing both cultural isolation and rejection. The authors state that “If the individual feels isolated from his or her culture, unaccepted by the ‘majority culture’ and has a lack of social support, a consequent sense of rejection, alienation and poor self-esteem may occur” (19).

Unaccompanied minors who experience cultural and social isolation need to begin to feel a sense of welcome and belonging in their new homeland before the feelings of isolation will lessen. Being welcomed into the broader cultural group will not only help them to feel less isolated but will also help others to better understand and appreciate their home cultures.

### **Detention**

The detention of unaccompanied minors was briefly mentioned earlier in this paper, but it is such an enormous problem that it requires more space. It is common knowledge that

unaccompanied minors are habitually detained in these detention centers, most often because there is no room for them anywhere else or because they declare themselves as adults to avoid the risks of registration as a minor. The Human Rights Watch report “Left to Survive” details the experiences of fourteen-year-old Hussein S, an unaccompanied boy from Iraq who suffered detainment in the Greek islands:

He was traumatized to such an extent that he had harmed himself and suffered from nightmares. He clung to a doll throughout the interview. His mental state seemed to be the result of having witnessed family members killed and his father abducted and murdered, before insurgents started to target him. He arrived to Samos in March 2008, was registered as an adult based on his own declaration and detained for 27 days jointly with adults, before being put outside the Samos detention center with a deportation order but no assistance. (“Left to Survive”)

The tests administered to determine a new arrival’s age are often random and haphazard, with very few common elements between the various registration centers, and this results in unaccompanied minors being detained unlawfully on a regular basis. Digidiki and Bhabha give the example of a boy from Afghanistan who was sixteen years old and was detained for more than six months on the island of Lesbos. They share that the boy thought “he was a criminal and that’s why he was deprived of his liberty. How can you explain to him that he is detained because the government and the EU cannot find a suitable place for him to stay?” (12).

The detainment of unaccompanied minors is contrary to Greek law, which states that “the authorities should separate minors into safe accommodation, where they are appointed guardians who represent them in legal proceedings” (Agerholm). It has become clear that this law is not



being followed. According to migration researcher Eva Cossé, “Rather than being protected, dozens of vulnerable children are being locked up in dirty, crowded cells with unrelated adult males” (qtd. in “Left to Survive”). The detainment of unaccompanied minors is a serious violation of their human rights and only compounds their personal trauma.

These children face myriad hazards on the islands and streets of Greece that create for many an unbearable existence. If these hazards are not dealt with, there will be a multitude of future risks for these unaccompanied minors, including continued homelessness, further cultural dislocation, and isolation, which can lead to future indoctrination and continued social exclusion. Many will live with undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues. The treatment or lack of treatment of unaccompanied minors will affect generations to come. Efforts must be made today to ensure that systematic failures do not keep occurring and that unaccompanied minors are seen and treated as people with hope and a future, rather than condemned to a life of instability, trauma, and lack of care.

## **6. The Purpose: Why We Should Care**

Every portion of this thesis to this point has told of the incredible injustices facing unaccompanied minors within Greece. The previous pages act as evidence and testimony to the wrongs that have been committed upon unaccompanied minors, but the following pages propose potential solutions for how these injustices may be made right. I seek to offer here a sign of hope that there can be better days ahead, and that even when injustice has been committed, justice can overcome.

As a believer in Jesus Christ and in the validity of the Christian scriptures, I believe that seeking justice and loving others is part of my mandate and calling. Within the pages of these scriptures are God’s heart for justice and His love for the widow, orphan, immigrant, and the

poor; for the marginalized, the oppressed, and the forgotten. The scriptures contain such verses as these:

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. (Isa. 1:17)

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic. 6:8)

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

These and so many other verses show that God cares for his people and that his heart is for us to be people of justice.

In his book *Overrated*, Eugene Cho observes that “Justice is the act of restoring something to fullness after it has been harmed. Justice is making things right” (315). Bethany Hoang offers a similar idea in her book *The Justice Calling*: “In its most direct biblical formulation, justice can best be described as setting things right” (11). I believe that *setting things right* is God's desire for his world—that his people would begin to set right those things that have been broken and harmed.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I look to him and his teachings to understand what it means to seek justice on behalf of others. I care for the plight of unaccompanied minors because within the teachings of Jesus Christ, I learn of a heart that beats for the welfare of others and a heart that desires justice for those who have been treated unjustly. I read of a man who deeply loved and

continues to love all his created ones. I read of a man who is heartbroken by the unjust treatment of those he loves. As I examine the question of why we should care for refugees and unaccompanied minors, I again look to Jesus and this idea of setting things right.

Throughout scripture we are shown how to love our neighbor and taught why we should love him. If we were to love the way Jesus instructs us to, it would mean that “the refugee—whether from Syria, Somalia, or Burma, whether living one mile or ten thousand miles from us, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or an atheist, and whatever else might distinguish them—is our neighbor. The command of Jesus is to love them” (Bauman 22). Jesus’ love for the stranger, the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow need to be at the heart of our pursuit of justice for them.

The teachings of Jesus show us that all people have value and worth and that all people are made in the image of God. Bauman reminds us that “each human being, regardless of ethnicity, gender, legal status, disability, or any other qualifier, is ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ by the creator God (Ps. 139:14), and as such has inherent dignity. We value and protect human life because we believe it is precious to God” (22). I care and I am compelled to act on behalf of unaccompanied minors because they are children made in the image of God. They have worth and value and should be protected and cared for as if they are the most valuable treasure in the world.

Bethany Hoang eloquently portrays the heart of Jesus:

For every image, story, and statistic that overwhelms us, for every victim and perpetrator whose name we learn or even meet in person, for each glimpse of injustice that we see as we open our eyes wider, God sees infinitely more, and Scripture invites us into this seeing with God. God hears every cry of every single person who suffers, every victim who is abused, and every perpetrator

who banks on the lie that God does not see or hear or act. God invites us to hear the cries and to respond with him— fueled by his words, empowered by his Spirit. (30)

For every unaccompanied minor who has endured treacherous seas and who has been sexually exploited and abused, for every minor who has seen death and experienced loss, for every minor who has no bed on which to lay their head and no one to hear their cries, he hears, he sees, and he cares; and he asks us to do the same. In his book *The Just Shall Live by Faith*, Curtiss Paul DeYoung challenges us to act upon injustice, to not deafen our ears to the cries of the oppressed. He reminds us plainly that “the cries of the oppressed cry out to us and we must act” (13). This is why we act.

## **7. The Process: First Steps**

The question then becomes, how will we respond and what will we do with all this information, with all this evidence and testimony about the plight of unaccompanied minors? The answer is that we respond through sustainable humanitarian and holistic efforts. We respond by understanding the needs and making every effort possible to bring practical change to the unjust systems and structures that keep unaccompanied minors trapped in hopelessness and despair. Then we figure out ways to bring about hope and a brighter future for them.

The first steps in this process include lamentation, the ministry of presence, prophetic advocacy, and collaborative and collective leadership.

### **Lamentation**

One way we can respond to the plight of unaccompanied minors is to lament alongside and with those who have been damaged and who have lost hope. Emmanuel Katongole, author of *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing*, writes of lament as

“a cry directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world’s deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is the prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are” (78).

When I spent time in Athens for my field work, there was a continuous engagement with pain as I heard devastating stories from refugees and asylum seekers. I listened to the story of a mother from Afghanistan whose six children were smuggled to Athens by human traffickers after her husband was killed by the Taliban. I sat in Omonia and Victoria Squares and watched young boys selling themselves for sex in order to survive; I listened as they said “no” but went with their exploiter anyway. I listened to case workers share how they had children as young as nine years old sleeping on the steps outside their building because they had no beds for them inside. I heard the story of a child, a baby as young as three, being left without family when her parents died at sea. These are true stories; these are real-life situations that should tear us up inside, stories that should cause us to weep.

The only thing I could do with the stories I heard and the things I saw was to give them back to God and to cry and weep in lament for these children of God who had faced and were facing things I could not even imagine. Hoang reminds us that “there are countless stories of people all over our world—people created by God for a life of wholeness and flourishing but who instead undergo a living nightmare of injustice” (81). Such were the people I met in Athens: deeply broken and hurting people, scarred from the injustices of this world. Katongole shares that “when we draw near to those who are most sinned against, our call is not first to ‘make a difference’ but to allow the pain of that encounter to disturb us” (84). Sometimes what we need to do first is to allow ourselves to be disturbed and broken by the despair we see around us.

We must first learn the language of lament before rushing to try to find solutions for the problems we see. Lament opens the way for us to name the brokenness, to honestly sit and mourn with those who mourn and weep with those who weep. It is an ongoing action that helps us stay close to the heart of God even as we move into the work of justice. Katongole suggests that lament “helps us to become aware of ways that we might be contributing to the problems we see, and it prepares the ground for the long-lasting but slow-going work of transformation” (100). It’s easy to run away from people who are suffering and much harder to stand in the struggles with them; but before we attempt to do anything else, stand we must. We must stand alongside those who are suffering, we must hear and embrace their cries, and we must spend time in lament.

### **Ministry of Presence**

We also respond through the ministry of presence. When undertaking my fieldwork in Athens, there was one occasion on which I and a volunteer from The Salvation Army entered Victoria Square looking for any unaccompanied minors we might be able to talk to, pray with, or get some lunch for. One young man caught my eye straight away. He was sitting between a lift and the stairs to the train station below. He was disheveled and sitting scrunched up with his legs folded beneath him. He was holding on tight to a ripped plastic bag. I walked over to him with a smile and asked him how he was; he just smiled and shook his head. I smiled back and asked him if he spoke English, and again, he just smiled and shook his head. I realized that we couldn’t communicate together and I felt that maybe I was invading his space, so I shook his hand and said goodbye. I went and sat on a nearby bench with my friend. A few minutes later, the same young man walked up and motioned for us to let him sit on the bench with us. We shuffled over

and made a space for him. We offered him some water and he shook his head. We offered him some chocolate and again he smiled and shook his head.

We began to use Google Translate to talk. We found out he was from Afghanistan; he was there in Greece by himself and he had been there for one year. He had been living on the street this whole time. He didn't have any relatives or friends with him and knew no one. Google Translate was not really translating very well and often he would just smile at us. So, after a few minutes, we settled into a peaceful silence. I bought him some lunch but he didn't want it. The three of us just sat on this bench together in silence, with the occasional glance and smile. After about forty minutes we had to leave. As I was walking away, my heart hurt; I was not able to offer this young man anything, I couldn't communicate with him, and he didn't want food or water. I wondered why he came and sat with us. He didn't seem to have an agenda; he was just happy to sit and smile with us. I then began to realize that for someone who has been invisible for a year, maybe just the ministry of presence is enough. Being recognized and treated as a human may have been all he needed for those forty minutes. Maybe he just needed someone to see and acknowledge him.

Jesus is the ultimate example of how we should relate and be in relationship with other people. John Paul Lederach in his book *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* shares that "Jesus' ministry had roots in grace expressed primarily through the quality of presence: the way he chose to be present, in relationship and in the company of others" (45). I cannot think of a people group more in need of someone to model the love and presence of Jesus in their lives than these unaccompanied youth in Athens.

Lederach goes on to contend that "compassion starts with a quality of attentiveness that requires the simple act of noticing the other as a person" (48). The young man I have described

above had no friends and no family, and he slept on the streets, probably going unnoticed for days on end. Yet that day, we noticed him, we acknowledged him; and maybe just for that moment that was all he needed, just to be seen and noticed. We shared no common language, but for that small moment in time we noticed and acknowledged him. The ministry of presence is so simple but powerful.

Unaccompanied minors are creative, skilled, smart, and genuinely wonderful people, but when most people first encounter them, they are broken, lost, defeated, and alone. They are in need of the ministry of compassion and presence. Unaccompanied minors need to know that they are seen and valued and that people are willing to walk alongside them. Simone Manuel of the NGO Faros shared with me that “so many of the kids we deal with are broken and angry and traumatized. We show them selfless love because so many of them are not acquainted with that anymore; they have lost any sense of being loved or valued” (Manuel). Lederach responds to such loss with the challenge that “the single most significant starting point of reconciliation is noticing our mutual humanity” (51). We need to walk alongside unaccompanied minors and to let them know we see them, we hear them, and we are with them. We need to let them know that we are in this together.

### **Prophetic Advocacy**

In an essay from *The Justice Project*, Anthony Smith argues that the “prophetic task of postmodern Christians is to name properly and cast out demon legacies of racial imperialism in our collective imaginations and habits” (102). Unaccompanied minors suffer incredible injustice within various Greek systems and structures. I don’t think it is all racially motivated, but there can be elements of racism in how some unaccompanied minors from various countries are treated. No matter the reason for the injustice, we must name it and we must call it out.



Unaccompanied minors are not just statistics or political fodder; they are children who had families and friends and a community, and they are children with names. We must stand on their behalf. Author Mathew Soerens in *Welcoming the Stranger* reminds us that “behind the statistics and politics [of refugees] are stories of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives. There are millions of stories that vary as much as race, nationality, gender, and faith” (52). Unaccompanied minors have stories, stories that began long before they ended up on the shores of Greece. We must work to ensure their stories are told. We must ensure that they don’t just become a statistic mentioned in essays and reports, but instead get to live full lives and share their stories.

As people who seek justice on behalf of others, we must become advocates for those who are being treated unjustly. We must speak up. Soerens states that “advocacy is vital, both practically and theologically, to the church’s calling to bring about justice, speak out for truth, defend the poor and oppressed, and work toward the redemption of the whole of creation” (3972). We must never become silent when people need us to raise our voice.

Brenda Salter McNeil suggests that “our collective calling is to make the kingdom of God visible on earth. Every time we bridge racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic divides, we become prophetic witnesses to the reality of the kingdom of God” (124). We must understand that prophetic advocacy is our call, and it must be our response.

### **Collaborative and Collective Leadership**

Paramount to meeting the needs of unaccompanied minors is collaboration between organizations hoping to serve them. Petra Kuenkel in her book *The Art of Leading Collectively: Co-Creating a Sustainable, Socially Just Future* argues “that most challenges of sustainability—require us to go beyond the individual and build the capacity of groups and systems to move

important issues of common concern forward. This requires collective action, dialogue, and collaboration” (661). The lives of unaccompanied minors literally hang in the balance, with many barely surviving, and there is an urgent need to radically improve and expand the services being offered to them in Greece. It is has become increasingly clear that individual organizations and leaders are no longer able to competently deal with the concerns being raised and that a collective effort is needed.

As has been already stated, presently there are 3,700 unaccompanied minors in Greece—3,700 children who need protection and assistance. They have deep needs that cannot be met by one organization alone, especially as resources are dwindling, donations are down, and NGOs are leaving Greece at a rapid pace. Jonny Willis with Velos for Youth shared with me that,

More and more charities and projects that came to Greece at the start of the crisis are leaving, some even being forced out due to lack of funding and stricter legislation by the Greek Government regarding charities and religious organizations being in the country. Resources are scarce, there is a significant gap in the services being provided, but there are not enough people to help fill the gap and not enough money. (Willis)

Collaborative and collective leadership and the sharing of resources and ideas are needed now more than ever if organizations are to indeed make a difference in the lives of unaccompanied minors. Currently there is an urgent need to create safe and sustainable housing options, reliable sources of income and education, and a response to the psychosocial needs of unaccompanied minors. These needs must be met through collaboration. All the ideas in the world will become null if partnerships between agencies and community members are not made.

The desire to make a difference in the lives of unaccompanied minors is at the heart of this thesis and must be at the heart of those choosing to work with them in Greece. Kuenkel shares how she longs to see “the world through the lens of people who are busy changing it toward sustainability, who want to make a difference for the future of humankind” (392). This is the kind of leadership that is needed if there is to be a change in how unaccompanied minors are served in Greece. To achieve the lasting and sustainable change that is necessary, international, national, and local community leaders need to come together and share their resources, their dreams, and their ideas.

Leaders working together can reduce duplication of services, create unity and diversity in service delivery, fill in the gaps, and allow all those involved in helping and serving unaccompanied minors to have a voice. Kuenkel reassures us that new possibilities are available when we change the way we lead: “Change starts small, but we all have the capacity to sense future possibilities—small or large. Challenging the ‘impossible’ and seeing new possibilities is a faculty that we can cultivate” (1162).

Captain Ray Lamont, the Director of The Salvation Army’s ministries in Athens, is embracing collective leadership by partnering with Working in Hard Places to create a working group for those engaging with unaccompanied minors, particularly those who have been commercially sexually exploited. She shared with me in an interview that “we are beginning to move forward in understanding this issue with this population, who is doing what, the gaps, and what we need to do in a collaborative partnership with other organizations” (Lamont). The purpose of the first meeting of the Working in Hard Places group was:

...to gather information about organizations intentionally working with minors and the type of interaction and services they provide as it pertains to the labor and commercial

sexual exploitation of children (ages 0 to 18) within their client base. Our hope is that by answering questions linked to the identified objectives mentioned below, we will gain a broader understanding of what organizations are witnessing, indicators of labor and commercial sexual exploitation of children, what services and care they are able to provide, and what challenges and gaps need to be addressed collectively. (Lamont)

This is a perfect example of how organizations and leaders can come together to make a difference in their world and to find new solutions for problems being faced by their community.

Kuenkel observes that organizations working to make a difference “have a call to action—to sustainability...a call to learn collectively, to get even better at working together” (3311). In October 2018, The Salvation Army and many other faith and interdisciplinary groups came together at the Vatican to collaborate on a final plan for Children on the Move. Some of the organizations that joined in this partnership were the American Jewish World Services, Anglican Alliance, Christian Aid, Episcopal Relief & Development, GHR Foundation, World Health, Islamic Relief, The MacLellan Foundation, Samaritan’s Purse, The Salvation Army, Tearfund, and World Vision International (“About JLI”). During this meeting at the Vatican, the partners reflected on ways to end violence against children, and specifically against children on the move (children or young people and their families who are forcibly displaced internally or refugees).

There were several practices identified by the Joint Learning Initiative, as this collaboration became known as, that could help strengthen partnerships between organizations and ensure greater provision for those they are serving:

1. Share expertise, evidence, and project models and approaches which support children on the move.

2. Continue mapping current initiatives undertaken by faith actors with children on the move and strengthen the evidence base for what is working, what is not, and where we can do more together.
3. Identify a common language to frame coordination within religious communities and with secular organizations.
4. Align outreach, communications, and advocacy work, including the development of awareness raising materials to end violence against children on the move. Share positive stories of hope, love, and children as active agents of change.
5. Call for action at all levels—global, national and local—to end violence against children on the move.
6. Continue and deepen coordination with local, national and international faith bodies, states and United Nations actors and mechanisms.
7. Develop multi-stakeholder partnerships with faith communities, NGOs, governments and other actors that can help strengthening our actions, close the silos and build bridges of trust for common action.
8. Create a virtual mechanism for communicating, sharing and coordinating initiatives related to the action plan. (Faith in Action for Children on the Move)

If organizations in Greece working with unaccompanied minors began to follow these steps, their service and provision to unaccompanied minors would be dramatically different and would help so many more children in need. Kuenkel challenges organizations to think and work differently than they ever have before:

What if we stopped blaming others for failed or difficult collaboration efforts, and instead saw the global trend toward partnering and dialogue as a way of

training our muscles for the future? We need to become fit for collaboration, whether we're in the corporate sector, the public sector, or civil society. (400)

If new and sustainable approaches are to be created for unaccompanied minors, emphasis must be placed on finding common ground, new and fresh ways to partner, and ways to share resources and ideas. Finally, there must be a shared desire to see unaccompanied minors treated according to their value and to all the legal rights that are their due.

## **8. Sustainable Solutions**

Through the course of this paper, we have established that unaccompanied refugee and migrant minors are among the most vulnerable within the asylum-seeking community, with many facing sexual exploitation, trauma, and hardship. In order for unaccompanied minors to both survive and thrive there is a desperate need for sustainable and safe solutions to their needs.

In the words of Petra Kuenkel,

Sustainability requires innovation on a large scale—we cannot walk into the future with our minds focused on present problems. The challenges ahead cannot be addressed by singular solutions, territorial claims, and individual intelligence alone. We need to act and drive innovation in a context of understanding the world as an interconnected system and understanding humankind as a web of relationships. (1204)

This is what it is all about; it is about being innovative and choosing to focus on opportunities and not problems; it is about working with others and doing all we can to ensure that we give unaccompanied minors the hope of a restored and healthier future. When we respond to difficulties with solutions, we give hope to those who need it and give them a future that they might not have had otherwise.

What follows are case studies of three agencies who are making a significant difference in the lives of unaccompanied minors in Greece, organizations who are standing up and taking action. It is to be hoped that by looking at what is already working, we can find inspiration for even greater solutions to this crisis.

### **Case Study 1: The HOME Project**

The HOME Project is an initiative that was created to address the needs of refugee children, especially those children who have arrived in Greece alone. Their vision includes:

- Helping refugee children find safety and security and overcome the trauma of violence and loss,
- Motivating reintegration and healing, and
- Empowering new beginnings.

The HOME Project offers a comprehensive program that hopes to provide “relief from suffering to all those affected by the crisis and to give hope out of despair” (“About”). More than 50% of the project’s shelter staff are refugees themselves and testify to the possibility of future hope for those who are on similar journeys.

The HOME Project works to provide a safe and secure haven for unaccompanied minors throughout Greece by providing comprehensive and holistic services that include the following:

- Housing: 11 shelters that house 220 youth;
- Social, legal, and psychological support: individualized support by a team of psychologists, social workers, intercultural mediators, and translators;
- Education: language courses, skills-building workshops, art therapy, music therapy, and storytelling workshops;
- Training and employment: jobs for refugees through the refurbishing of property; and

- Emergency support: food, resources, equipment, and medication.

The HOME project welcomes donations from individuals, NGOs, private donors, corporations, media, public authorities, and national and international organizations and foundations. They also create income from their social enterprise of refurbishing property. Partnerships include Carry the Future, Ikea Foundation, CISV Greece, and UNHCR.

### **Case Study 2: Faros**

Faros translates to “lighthouse” in Greek, and this is what Faros hopes to be for unaccompanied minors. The organization offers care and humanitarian support to unaccompanied refugee children and youth and to some refugee families in Athens.

Faros was born out of an encounter that the co-founder, Patricia Kirk, had in 2011. She “noticed a 14-year old, unaccompanied, Afghan boy sleeping alone in one of Athens’ public parks. ‘His face had a lifeless expression. He was utterly invisible,’ she recalls” (*Faros*). She realized there was a lack of outreach and protection services for unaccompanied children, so she decided to act. Faros began in 2014: “The dream was to start a place where refugee children could find a caring environment and professional help, discover their worth, and find hope for the future” (*Faros*).

Faros offers a range of programs and is holistic in its approach. They offer:

- Shelter: 22 beds available to unaccompanied refugee boys from the ages of 10 to 16.
- Drop in center: a weekday drop-in center located in the center of Athens, close to areas with many refugees. They offer meals, informal education, vocational training and sports activities.



- Street Outreach: a street team consisting of a psychologist, social worker, and a cultural mediator does street outreach to support and inform unaccompanied minors of what services they can offer.

Faros also helps with the reunification of unaccompanied minors with family members around the world and has a 100% success rate in this area (Manuel).

Faros is dependent upon individual and corporate sponsorships and donations. They are also reliant upon partnerships with other NGOs and foundations to help with the running of programs. Partnerships include International Aid Services, John S Latsis Public Benefit Foundation, UNICEF, UNHCR, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and EPIM.

### **Case Study 3: Velos Youth**

Velos Youth is a nonprofit organization that provides activities and a safe space for displaced and disenfranchised young people aged 16-21. The program is delivered by the Refugee Youth Service and has centers in Calais, France; Ventimiglia, Italy; and Athens, Greece.

Their mission is to foster feelings of belonging and self-worth and a sense of community within unaccompanied minors (*Velos Youth*). They reach an average of 650 -750 young people a year. Velos Youth has a clear understanding of the role they are to play in this refugee crisis:

Our target demographic category of 16-21-year olds will likely spend years, decades or even their entire life in Greek society. Therefore, efforts must be made to empower, integrate and amplify their voice so that a healthy and inclusive society is formed. Velos Youth embraces this cause by supporting the rights of young people, particularly in the areas of asylum, health and mental health, housing, protection, education and employment. (*Velos Youth*)

They offer the following services:

- Daytime sanctuary: a safe and relaxed space where young people can access support from both professionals and members of the refugee community. Meals are provided, as is access to showers and washing machine facilities, and materials are distributed to service users who are homeless or living in squats.
- Personal & Social Development Program: a varied program of activities focuses on wellbeing and social/interpersonal development, promoting belonging, self-respect, and community.
- A centralized hub: a network to provide access and referrals to specialized services, recreational and learning activities such as skateboarding, mobile library, etc.
- Situation support and monitoring: case management that supports 50 to 60 cases.

Velos Youth is reliant upon personal and corporate donations. They partner with Echo Refugee Library, Free Movement Skateboarding, International Rescue Committee, Spanish Red Cross, United Pony Caravan, Amaka, Humanity Crew, and Refugee Legal Support.

## **9. Recommendations**

In the case studies above, we have only looked at three of the organizations working with unaccompanied youth, but these are three of the most well-known organizations within Greece. Between them they only have enough beds for 242 children, yet there are currently more than 3,700 unaccompanied minors in Greece. That is a huge discrepancy. Clearly more needs to be done if we are to make a dent in this issue. Unaccompanied minors need us to stand in the gap for them and take action on their behalf. Below are some recommendations on how we can do that.

**Creativity and innovative thinking are needed.**

Organizations concerned with the needs of unaccompanied minors need to be creative in finding ways to accommodate them and serve them. There are many obstacles before them, especially in terms of Greek laws, policies, and economic health, but the three case studies above prove that it can be done; programs can be created and sustained if the approach is creative enough. Kelley and Kelley in their book *Creative Confidence* state that “it takes courage to leave the land of certain outcomes and the comfort of what we know to try a new approach or share a wild sounding idea” (57). We must take on that courage to try new ideas, especially when those ideas might just change the world for an unaccompanied child.

In Ilford, London, The Salvation Army in partnership with other community agencies has started an initiative called Project Malachi to help tackle increasing homelessness in their community. Project Malachi aims to provide shelter and employment to rough sleepers in the area, using shipping containers. The shipping containers will be converted into individual studio flats that can accommodate up to 42 people each, and “everyone staying in the flats will be provided with practical support in various life skills, including job hunting, continuing education, and advice about benefits” (Purnell). Using shipping containers is not a new idea. They housed unaccompanied youth in shipping containers in Calais, but those were empty, cold, and lacking in any kind of human warmth. They were meant to drive the youth away and not meant to be a home. There was no extra support that came with them. These shipping containers are meant to be both a home and a place of support, as Captain John Clifton of The Salvation Army shared with me in London:

What’s different about Project Malachi is that it will not only be a place to live for those who are currently sleeping rough in Ilford, it will provide opportunities

for volunteering and community engagement too, including through social enterprise. We want it to become a place of hope for many people. (Purnell)

Project Malachi is an example of an innovative and creative idea that can make a long-term difference in the lives of those in need.

Maybe the answer for unaccompanied youth in Greece lies in those shipping containers, or perhaps it is in the half-empty apartment buildings in Greece. In Greece, members of the same family tend to live in the same apartment buildings, with grandparents, parents, uncles, and aunts all living in the same place. What if families in these buildings decided to sponsor 5-10 unaccompanied youth and opened up one or two apartments for them in their building? It could be a form of community sponsorship, with the family giving them accommodation, inviting them to meals and family events, and creating community with them. Other NGOs such as Faros or Velos Youth could provide them with counselling, schooling, and social activities, but the families could create community for them and a place to stay. This idea would take creativity and collaboration to bring into reality, but it is by no means impossible.

The family unit is the most important foundation of Greek society, providing emotional and economic support to the individual. Greek culture is also a collectivist culture, in which a person's family name and background influences perceptions of that person's reputation, status, and honor. There is often a social pressure to present one's family name in a good light. It is not uncommon to hear Greeks publicly praising their family's dignity and integrity by pointing out their achievements and positive qualities ("Greek Culture"). What if we harness these qualities and values of Greek culture to encourage Greek families to extend their family status to those who need it and to do something that helps others? This could be a game-changer for

unaccompanied minors in Greece and for the Greek community, giving the community a new lease of life after some very hard and dark days.

For Greek families to change their centuries-old cultural customs and attitudes, there would need to be a miracle, but it could happen if change occurred one family at a time. This would involve implementing Incremental Change theory. Consultant Jim Baker defines incrementalism or gradualism as “the practice of making changes or achieving goals by degrees, in stages or small steps. This is in contrast to sudden, dramatic or revolutionary change” (Baker). If we were to work with one family at a time, slowly building relationships and showing how this new initiative could benefit not only their family but also their community, we could eventually bring about a lasting change. I have included at the end of this paper a practical expression of the idea above to show that there is potential to create programs that change the future trajectory of unaccompanied youth in Greece and that the creation of a holistic model is possible (see Appendix).

In his book *How to Change the World*, David Bornstein asserts that the world needs “people with new ideas to address major problems who are relentless in the pursuit of their visions, people who simply will not take ‘no’ for an answer, who will not give up until they have spread their ideas as far as they possibly can” (1). This is what unaccompanied minors need from us; they need us to be people who will dream big and who will be relentless in our pursuit to help them.

### **Social enterprise, partnerships, and volunteers are a must for sustainability.**

Greece is not in good shape financially and Greek citizens are struggling to live day to day. As previously indicated, the financial crisis that Greece suffered virtually wiped out the country’s middle class (Lamont). The nation is only now moving out of this economic downfall,

and things are still very hard. Government funding for refugee work is all but nonexistent, and many NGOs in Greece report that donations and funding opportunities are drying up.

In order for an NGO to survive in Greece, it needs to depend on partnerships for resources, time, and finances, and it needs to have a social enterprise that can bring in money. Agencies that I spoke with were highly dependent on partnerships they had made with other agencies, both within Greece and overseas, and they all spoke of funding becoming increasingly hard to come by. Major Curtis Plante from The Salvation Army Greece shared with me that he runs The Salvation Army's two churches (one in Athens, one in Thessaloniki), the Refugee Day center, and their anti-trafficking Green Light Project, all on only \$350,000 a year. There simply isn't additional funding to be found. The refugee day center serves more than 600 refugees weekly and has only one paid employee. The work is possible because of refugee volunteers and overseas mission teams serving a few weeks at a time.

Any social enterprise that is started needs to ensure that it has a wider focus than just the local Greek population, as this population does not have a lot of extra income to spend. A social enterprise connected in some way to tourists and overseas contacts would have the best chances of success. This could perhaps involve a refugee-run restaurant, a cake/dessert shop (Greek people and tourists love their sweets), or a store that upcycles refugee artifacts they have bought with them on the journey, like life jackets and blankets. The Salvation Army has an international social enterprise called Others that sells items made by trafficking survivors in India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. These items are sold in upmarket stores in Europe to help The Salvation Army sustain their anti-trafficking ministries. Something similar could be done in Greece for unaccompanied minors.

Creativity with the resources that exist and partnerships inside and outside of Greece where funding is available can make solutions to this crisis sustainable.

### **Appreciate what is already happening.**

There is a lot that is not going well for unaccompanied minors, a lot of heartbreak and trauma and broken government systems, but we need to learn how to see and appreciate the good that is also happening. In his book *Walking with the Poor*, Bryant Myers notes that “an appreciative perspective encourages transformational development promoters to find God's redemptive work in the life of the community, and within themselves, and to seek to become more intentionally part of it” (257). One of the ways we will help unaccompanied minors is to see the restoration that is already happening and to join in. Myers offers this challenge: “Instead of looking for what is wrong or missing and then developing problem-solving responses, [the appreciative approach] looks for what is working, successful, and life-giving, and attempts to see additional possibilities” (257).

Many pages have been spent here on what is missing in the areas of protection and provision for unaccompanied minors in Greece, but there are some good people doing some good work, as we can see through the three case studies above. Lives are being restored, hurts and trauma are being healed, and children have safe places to lay their heads at night. We need to be able to appreciate and celebrate the good while still working towards better.

## **10. Final Comments**

This paper has been the fruit of my journey toward understanding the lives of unaccompanied minors and the challenges they have faced and still face on a daily basis. It was born out of my own questions about what could be done to assist and help them.

The disastrous circumstances encountered by unaccompanied minors in Greece, and indeed globally, are the result of existing and increasing political unrest, instability, wars, religious persecution, and violence in their countries of origin. That their lives are endangered and are put at risk through no fault of their own makes this tragedy even more tragic. Both my personal experience of working with unaccompanied minors in Athens and the research involved in writing this thesis have led me to conclude that while individuals and aid agencies cannot fully address the primary causes of displacement, they can certainly make a significant difference in the lives of unaccompanied minors, one life and one person at a time.

I have attempted to put a human face to the tragedy facing unaccompanied minors and to introduce the reader to the many obstacles before them, the broken systems and structures they face, and the dangers and risks that follow them. I have attempted to show the reality of the 3,700 children and young people who have been left in Greece without shelter and without their basic needs being met, and who are at daily at risk of danger. This journey has revealed heart-breaking statistics and tragic stories of loss and trauma. Yet it has also revealed the incredible courage, bravery, and strength of unaccompanied minors, and the beautiful reality that this is not the end but only the beginning of their stories. I believe that the holistic model presented in this paper can considerably benefit the lives of unaccompanied minors not only in Greece, but around the world. I have presented it here not simply as an idea but as a call to action on their behalf.

The work of justice on behalf of unaccompanied minors will at times bring about discouragement, roadblocks, and frustrations. Nevertheless, if we choose to journey with them, if we choose to engage in this issue, and if we choose to act justly on their behalf, we can provide them with hope and with the chance of a future filled with opportunity.



## **Appendix: Olive Tree Youth Support Network (Program Model)**

What follows is a practical expression of the holistic model discussed in this paper, which can be adapted and modified for those wishing to support and assist unaccompanied minors. This is not a real program currently running but has the potential to be one. The content below can serve as a starting point and resource for those desiring to respond to the needs described in this paper. It is an example of what could be achieved if all that has been discussed in this paper is taken into consideration.

### **Olive Tree Youth Support Network: Summary**

Olive Tree Youth Support Network is a Christian nonprofit run by The Salvation Army in Greece with support from the International Salvation Army. The olive tree is one of the most well-known and sacred trees around the world. The olive tree is often used as a symbol of friendship and peace, and it has great significance for Christians. In the Bible, the olive tree is used as part of God's story for the world. The Olive Tree Youth Support Network hopes to be a source of peace and friendship for Athens's unaccompanied minors and for the surrounding community. Our desire is that it becomes a space where unaccompanied minors can write new stories for their lives, where healing can take place, and where hope can grow.

The idea for Olive Tree Youth Support Network began in March 2016 when Director Sandra Pawar went on a mission trip to Athens and one evening found herself confronted with the image of young boys selling themselves for sex. She vowed that night to find out what was going on, and this led her to discover the devastating situation facing more than 3,000 unaccompanied minors in Greece. Olive Tree Youth Support Network is being created to address

the many and varied needs of unaccompanied minors in Greece and to provide a safe and secure place for them to stay.

Before opening Olive Tree Youth Support Network, there will be a year of intense community capacity-building within Athens. This will involve building relationships with local Greeks and investing in their lives, as well as in the lives of unaccompanied minors. We will also focus on volunteer recruitment among local Greek families. We aim not only to recruit volunteers but also to find families willing to open up and share their apartment buildings with unaccompanied youth.

### **Mission**

Our mission is to:

- Provide for current needs
- Protect from risks and dangers
- Prepare for positive future plans and dreams
- Prevent continued harm and trauma
- Partner with local, national, and international partners to ensure quality program delivery

### **Approach**

Our approach is a Narrative Strengths-Based approach, which means we value the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections, and potential in individuals and communities. It also means we value the life stories of people and help them see within their stories their strength and resilience. It does not mean we ignore struggles or challenges but that we work in collaboration with unaccompanied youth and the surrounding community to find solutions. Our focus is on the health and wellbeing of unaccompanied minors and on empowering them to experience and live quality lives (Pattoni).

We believe that every child and young person we work with has the right to the following:

1. Safety
2. Physical health
3. Mental health
4. Shelter
5. Access to quality education and training
6. Employment
7. Community
8. Culturally appropriate services
9. Personal choices
10. Practice of personal faith

### **What We Offer**

**PROVIDE** 

- **Shelter**

We hope to obtain five community residences within the city of Athens that can house up to twenty-five unaccompanied minors in five apartments. These residences will come from five Greek families whom we would come alongside before officially opening up Olive Tree Youth Support Network. The desire is to have five apartments in family-owned apartment buildings in Athens, and to have these families sponsor five unaccompanied minors each. They will provide an apartment with bedrooms, living room, and a kitchen, and Olive Tree Youth Support Network will cover the costs of electricity and will fully furnish the apartments. We don't want their involvement to stop at housing, but we would like to see the young people becoming fully

involved with their family through invitations to family dinners and events. This is a model similar to community sponsorship that is currently being adopted for families in the UK, but instead of sponsoring a whole family, they are sponsoring children and inviting them into their family culture. We will work to have five new families signed up to participate by the end of each year that will giving us another twenty-five beds yearly.

- **Meals**

We will provide three meals a day at our day center for any unaccompanied youth, as well as food parcels for those who are living in our community apartments.

- **Reception and Detention Center Visitation**

Once a week, outreach teams will go to reception and detention centers to visit with unaccompanied minors, to check on their wellbeing and legal status, to offer resources, and to be a friendly face. This will allow us to be a presence and an advocate for unaccompanied minors during some of the most difficult and unsettling periods of their journey.

- **Day Center**

Our day center will act as our support center. We will open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We will also make available showers and washing machines for those who need to clean and freshen up. Art and music classes, as well as recreational sports activities, will also be on offer. Free legal and medical support will also be made available.

- **Pastoral Care**

We are a Christian organization and will offer church services and Bible studies for unaccompanied minors who are interested. We will also provide access to local religious leaders for those who profess a different faith.

**PROTECT**



- **Street Outreach**

We will do daily street outreach in Athens's squares and parks, as we believe that being available and present to unaccompanied minors is vitally important. We will create two different outreach teams, one going out during the day and one during the evening. The latter team will be specialized and trained in anti-sexual trafficking/exploitation work. The intention of these teams is to check on the welfare of unaccompanied minors and monitor any criminal behavior affecting them, including the solicitation of sex from unaccompanied minors.

- **Psychological Support**

Many unaccompanied minors arrive in Greece with trauma and mental health issues from the difficult journeys they have undergone and the violence and exploitation they may have faced upon arrival in Athens. We want this to be a healing environment for them, and so we will offer trauma counselling and mental health workshops by a team of psychologists, social workers, intercultural mediators, and translators.

We will also offer a storytelling workshop, which will help unaccompanied minors to work through their personal stories and journeys and to tell their stories through pictures, digital media, song, poetry, public speaking, or journaling. We have found this to be a means to healing and empowerment and believe strongly in this therapeutic method.

**PREPARE**



- **Education**

We want to ensure that unaccompanied minors are being prepared and equipped for future opportunities, and we do not want their past experiences to limit them, so we will partner with The Technical University of Athens to offer English classes, Greek classes, and vocational

training. We believe access to these resources helps not only with their education but also with their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

- **Employment and Employment Skills**

We want to equip unaccompanied minors who are old enough to work, with job-ready skills. Our focus will be on digital literacy, web design, decision-making, woodworking, critical and creative thinking, financial management, and customer service. We want to ensure that these young people are prepared for future independence, and being job-ready is key to that goal.

- **Social Enterprise**

We will develop a social enterprise called The Sweet Connection, a cake and sweet shop that will be run from a Salvation Army-owned building near Victoria Square. Unaccompanied minors will be trained in baking, decorating, customer service, and financial management. We will also create a cake and dessert recipe book that will be sold directly from the shop and to interested parties overseas. It will include desserts and sweets that were an important part of the young people's lives in their home countries, and it will include their stories and testimonies.

- **Mentoring and Leadership Workshops**

Unaccompanied minors have so many gifts and skills and voices that need to be heard. We believe that all we need to do is to give them the opportunity to develop them. With this in mind, we will develop a mentorship and leadership track that will aim to help them develop social and life skills; help them integrate into Greek culture while also maintaining and celebrating their cultural heritage; provide opportunities for social engagement with the community; and provide opportunity to participate in civic and community services activities.

**PREVENT**



- **Advocacy**

We will advocate for unaccompanied minors on local, national, and international levels and fight to ensure that unaccompanied minors are treated fairly. We will work to ensure that legislation and procedures for unaccompanied minors are strengthened and followed. We will fight to ensure that continued harm does not happen to unaccompanied minors in Greece and will work on their behalf to promote humanitarian and missional responses to their needs.

## **PARTNER**

- **Community Involvement**

We will actively seek to involve the local Greek community in our program, as we know that their support and buy-in is essential if unaccompanied minors are to live in peace in their communities. We need our community's help not only with resources but also in building relationships with the young people. The active involvement of people who live in the same community will help with resolving social and cultural isolation. It will also help with the wellbeing and mental health of unaccompanied minors when they feel accepted and part of a community. Community involvement teaches all involved about compassion and the understanding of others.

In order to help facilitate community, we intend to hold monthly storytelling evenings during which unaccompanied minors will share their stories through different media. We will also hold quarterly social events to which we invite the local Greek community to eat with us. We think this will become a vital part of what we do and will help to bring peace to the community in which we work and live.

- **Giving**

We will also partner with people on the local, national, and international level to raise funds, to find volunteers, and to gather resources to ensure that our program is of the highest

quality and that unaccompanied minors will receive the best support we can give them. We know that this project could not operate if we rely only on local funds. It will be important from the beginning to raise international support and funding.



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