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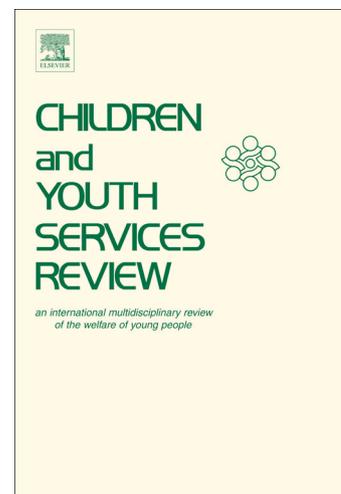
Mapping the situation of unaccompanied and separated children in Greece: A scoping review

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## Title page

### Full article title

Mapping the Situation of Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Greece: A Scoping Review

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## Highlights

- Little has been published on what is happening to minors who go missing in Greece.
- Irregular onward movement and invisible immobility likely account for disappearances.
- Pragmatic solutions are needed to address the systemic difficulties facing Greece.
- More must be done to maintain minors' safety and account for abscondences.
- Referral actors require improved compliance with their mandatory reporting duties.

## Abstract

Greece has long been one of the main European entry points for asylum seekers. Escalating global conflicts in 2014 and 2015 precipitated the displacement of millions of people, including many unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). Early reports from groups operating locally indicated that many UASC were disappearing after entering Greece, yet little is known about what then happens to these children. This scoping review aimed to identify any evidence to answer the question of what happens to UASC who 'go missing' while travelling through the migrant streams in Greece. A systematic search of eight electronic databases, supplemented by extensive hand searching of grey literature, yielded 33 documents meeting the inclusion criteria. Of these, only eleven were peer-reviewed primary studies, with the majority of includable evidence coming from organisation reports or news articles. Following content analysis, our findings suggest that irregular onward movement and unofficial continued stay in Greece likely account for the majority of UASC disappearances, though these conclusions are drawn from anecdotal evidence. This review

uncovers a significant evidence gap in an area requiring urgent international attention and action. Recommendations are made for researchers and policymakers whose influence can serve to improve the treatment and protection of UASC in Greece.

## **Mapping the Situation of Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Greece: A Scoping Review**

### **1. Introduction**

Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), in the Greek context, are children below the age of 18 who either arrive in Greek territory unaccompanied by adults (parents or carers) or minors who subsequently become unaccompanied or separated upon entry into the same (Law 4540/2018). Following various global factors and wars in countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, and Eritrea, and particularly the escalating conflicts in Egypt and Syria in 2014 and 2015, large numbers of UASC entered Greek territory (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2016; Ilias et al., 2019). Fear of being persecuted or recruited into armed groups in migrants' countries of origin, coupled with the pursuit of personal ambitions such as education and family reunification in Europe, are some of the major driving forces of migration into Greece (Ilias et al., 2019; IOM, 2019; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). The decision for UASC to embark on these journeys, however, is also sometimes made for them by families (UNICEF, 2017). As an interdisciplinary group of researchers, the authors of this paper were concerned about the position of these UASC for a variety of reasons and so came together to undertake further research.

### **2. Background**

As one of the vulnerable groups recognized under international law, UASC have the right to protection by states and governments (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). UASC arrive in Greece by either land or sea using various entry points which, inter alia, include Dodecanese Island, the northwestern port of Igoumenitsa, the port city of Patra, the Greek-Turkish land border of Evros Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros, Kos, and the Aegean Islands. A 'hotspot' approach was introduced by the European Commission in 2015 to concentrate operational support in areas with high numbers of arrivals, though this strategy attracted criticism for failing to protect the health and dignity of arrivals, with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) arguing that the approach was "designed as a deterrent to those who dare seek safety in Europe" (MSF, 2021, pp. 2-3).

Upon entry into Greece, UASC are required go through age assessment and registration at Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) (Greek Law 4375/2016; Greek Law 4540/2018; Greek Law 4636/2019; Joint Ministerial Decision 1982/2016, as cited in Asylum Information Database [AIDA], 2022a; Joint Ministerial Decision 9889/2020, as cited in AIDA, 2022a). Evidence shows that there are various challenges with identification and age assessment procedures, frequently resulting in UASC being wrongly registered as adults or as being accompanied (either due to error or because children make these claims themselves); these issues impact the reliability of data pertaining to UASC in Greece (AIDA, 2015; Musty, 2021; Praxis Greece, 2018; UNHCR, UNICEF, & IOM, 2017). Following reception and

identification, Greek authorities have a number of obligations to UASC, including referral to the competent Public Prosecutor for Minors, who holds responsibility for overseeing the appointment of a guardian or representative for minors' care (Hellenic Republic Ministry of Migration & Asylum, n.d.). Appointed representatives are then responsible for supporting asylum applications, in accordance with European Union (EU) asylum policy (Directive 2013/32/EU). Under the supervision of Greece's Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors, UASC are also entitled to access to special accommodation facilities for minors, free legal assistance, access to the public health system, and support to enroll in the national education system (Hellenic Republic Ministry of Migration & Asylum, n.d.).

Academics and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have argued that the initial 'warm' welcome by the Greek government has changed, and the relationship between the government and some NGOs operating locally is reported to have become strained (Ilias et al., 2019; Musty, 2021). Officials working to support and process UASC have often failed to abide by national and international laws, and anecdotal evidence suggests that even where UASC are being dealt with 'correctly', this may not amount to much more than provision of accommodation which is below the established standards (and contrary to Article 24 (2) of Directive 2013/33/EU on reception standards) (Musty, 2021; Praksis Greece, 2018; UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, 2019). These conditions are such that FRONTEX, an EU agency focused on securing and guaranteeing safety at the EU borders, is making decisions as to who qualifies as a minor (Sarantou & Theodoropoulou, 2019). In view of the developing situation in Greece – which sees NGO workers who have undertaken rescue missions being prosecuted for human trafficking offences (see Schmitz, 2021), and the accusations of complicity on illegal pushbacks which led the FRONTEX Executive Director to resign in April 2022 – there are grounds to believe this situation has worsened.

Despite the many groups operating locally to improve the situation, there is quite simply a dearth of knowledge as to what is happening to UASC in Greece, with some indication of considerable breaches of human rights, poor governance as well as exposure of a vulnerable population to significant risk of becoming the victims of (or indeed being recruited into) crime (Council of Europe, 2018). Given the established behaviour of human traffickers mobilizing to target vulnerable populations (Gyawali et al., 2017; Klaffenböck et al., 2017), this is a major concern. However, establishing what is happening to UASC children is challenging; there are almost no academic articles being produced and little broader reporting as agencies and international organizations struggle with the overwhelming nature of the situation. As one of the main entry points into Europe and a major focus within the 'migrant crisis,' Greece and the Greek islands are of particular concern. Local sources acknowledge that not all UASC can be accounted for (SOS Children's Village Greece, 2020) and yet, according to Laczko et al. (2019), "'Missing' migrant children are not always missing..." (p. xii). The question, then, is what is happening to UASC who go 'missing' while travelling as part of the migrant streams of Greece? This scoping and mapping exercise seeks to answer this question. In so doing, it contributes to knowledge recognized as urgently needed in the anti-human trafficking context (Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2024, p. 18).

### **3. Material and methods**

#### **3.1. Aim and design**

This scoping review aimed to systematically search for and identify any evidence to answer our central research question: What is happening to UASC who go missing while travelling

as part of the migrant streams in Greece? We envision that findings from this review will inform a larger study which will seek to ensure practice and policy within key regions are fully informed, with a view to securing better treatment and protection of unaccompanied minors in Greece. We followed the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) scoping review methodology, including updates proposed by Levac et al. (2010) and Peters et al. (2015, 2017, 2020). The original framework involves five stages: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing and reporting the results.

### 3.2. Search strategy

We used the Population, Concept and Context (PCC) framework from the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2020) in order to identify relevant literature:

Population: Unaccompanied minors (known or assumed to be aged 18 and under)

Concept: Disappearing while travelling through migrant streams

Context: Greece and Greek islands

A search of eight electronic databases was undertaken: Cochrane Library, Medline (biomedical literature), Public Affairs Information Service International (PAIS Index) (public affairs and political literature), LexisNexis (legal literature), Scopus (international literature), PsycInfo (psychology literature) and Social Policy & Practice (health and social care literature). Additionally, to identify grey literature sources, the ProQuest platform was searched, which allowed for multiple databases to be searched simultaneously, with the option to deselect specific source types. In order to access a diverse range of grey literature, all source types except 'scholarly journals' were selected. Database searches were undertaken in May 2021 and updated in July 2025 (Cochrane, Medline, ProQuest, PsycINFO and Scopus), following a protracted review process. A summary of the keyword combinations used across each database is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of keyword combinations**

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Population    separat\* OR unaccompanied OR lone OR alone OR solitary OR solo

AND

minor\* OR juvenile\* OR young people OR young person\* OR child\* OR adolescent\* OR young adult\* OR teenager\* OR youth

AND

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Concept      migrat\* OR asylum seek\* OR travel\* OR refugee\* OR migrant\*

AND

---

Context      Greece OR Greek islands OR Aegean OR Samos OR Les?os OR Chios OR  
Kos OR Leros OR Fylakio OR Moria OR Castellorizo OR Kastellorizo OR  
Karpathos OR Agathonisi OR Symi OR Idomeni OR Pazarkule border OR  
Rhodes OR Crete OR Balkan route OR Dodecanese OR Igoumenitsa OR  
Patra OR Evros

---

We supplemented our database searches with extensive hand-searching. First, the main entry points into Greece for asylum seekers were identified and reports from local NGOs and other relevant organizations were searched for manually, via their official websites. Next, we hand-searched three websites: AIDA, The Smile of the Child (a Greek non-profit child welfare organization), and the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, followed by hand-searching of selected journals: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*; *European Journal of Migration and Law*; and *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. The reference lists of all shortlisted articles were searched, followed by ongoing snowball searches of any ‘potentially relevant’ citations found during this process, and so on. Commencing in May 2021, the aim of these supplementary search efforts was to bolster the comprehensiveness of our search strategy and rule out the possibility of missing key evidence. However, it soon became clear that the breadth of ‘potentially relevant’ data was too extensive to screen in a timely manner, particularly as many of the documents we encountered were reports containing hundreds of pages. In the interests of progressing our research, a decision was made to stop searching for new literature in December 2021.

Screening was undertaken by two researchers [initials redacted], with each independently screening a selection of documents. Any uncertainties were discussed between these two researchers, with additional input from [redacted] and [redacted] when required. The software package Rayyan was used to screen database results, and a table was created using an online word processor to record screening decisions for all reports obtained through hand searching.

### 3.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We searched for any documents discussing the disappearances of UASC travelling through the migrant streams in Greece and the Greek islands. Any and all types of evidence were considered for inclusion, including primary research studies (quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods), secondary research, policy documents and reports, and grey literature. In order to obtain data pertaining to the current and ongoing situation, a date restriction of 2014 to present (2021 at the time) was applied because by many accounts, 2014 is considered to be the year during which an increased pattern of forced migration into Europe began. The definition of a minor adopted by this review is that provided under Greek law, which is “a third-country national or stateless person below the age of 18 years” (Law 4540/2018, article 2-d). Exclusion criteria included documents not available in English; published or relating to pre-2014; documents discussing disappearances occurring outside of Greek jurisdiction (e.g.

international waters, beyond the Greek border); and documents providing no data (e.g. speculation).

We decided to remain literal in our interpretation of the research question and maintained a narrow focus on *what* is happening to UASC, rather than collate evidence to address the broader question of *why* they go missing (literally or otherwise). This meant excluding evidence about issues that might result in minors becoming unaccounted for, such as inaccurate age assessment procedures or lack of population monitoring in reception facilities. Though undoubtedly relevant, these issues already have an evidence base (which we will touch upon when placing our findings into context).

### 3.4. Data extraction and synthesis

An initial data extraction proforma was drawn up to capture a broad range of information about the children and their circumstances, including legal status, details about their entry into Greece, and information on any interventions they had encountered (such as contact with legal guardians, enrollment into the school system, engagement with relocation schemes, etc.). However, it soon became clear that this level of detail did not exist within the data we encountered, and so a new proforma was devised to capture descriptive information about the included publications (Table 2) and, separately, the excerpts of data that answered our research question. This process was completed by two researchers [initials redacted], with each independently extracting data for a selection of documents and then checking the other's work.

Due to our descriptive research question, as well as the nature of the data we encountered, our approach to analysis was similarly descriptive. We used a process of inductive content analysis incorporating principles set out by Elo and Kyngäs (2007). Following initial familiarization with the data, the extracted excerpts were manually coded (without the use of analytical software) for manifest meaning by [initials inserted following review] and [initials], and codes were then grouped to form preliminary categories. These categories were reviewed and revised by [initials] before being shared with the whole team for feedback. No further revisions were made at this stage, and the findings were written up by [initials].

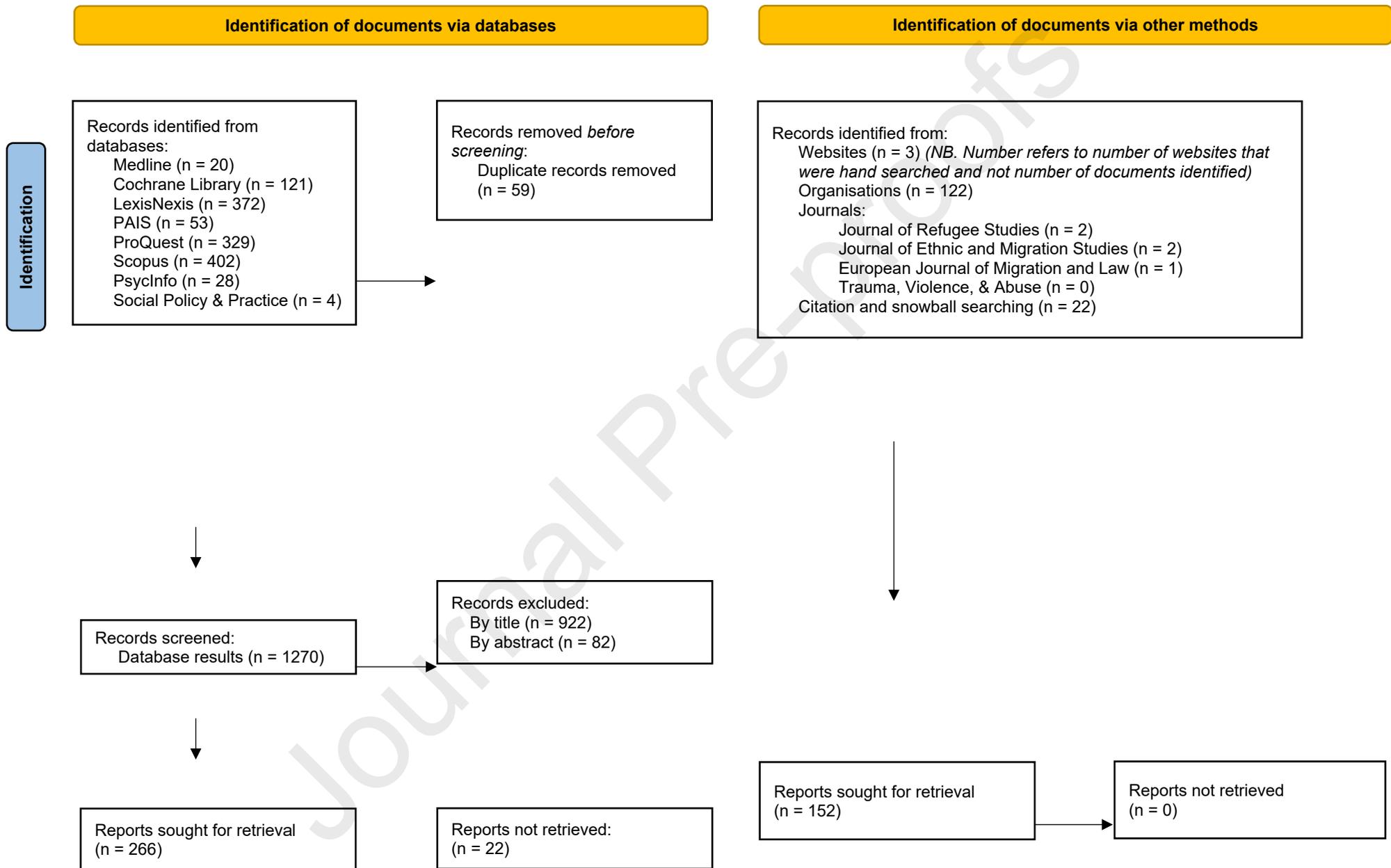
## 5. Findings

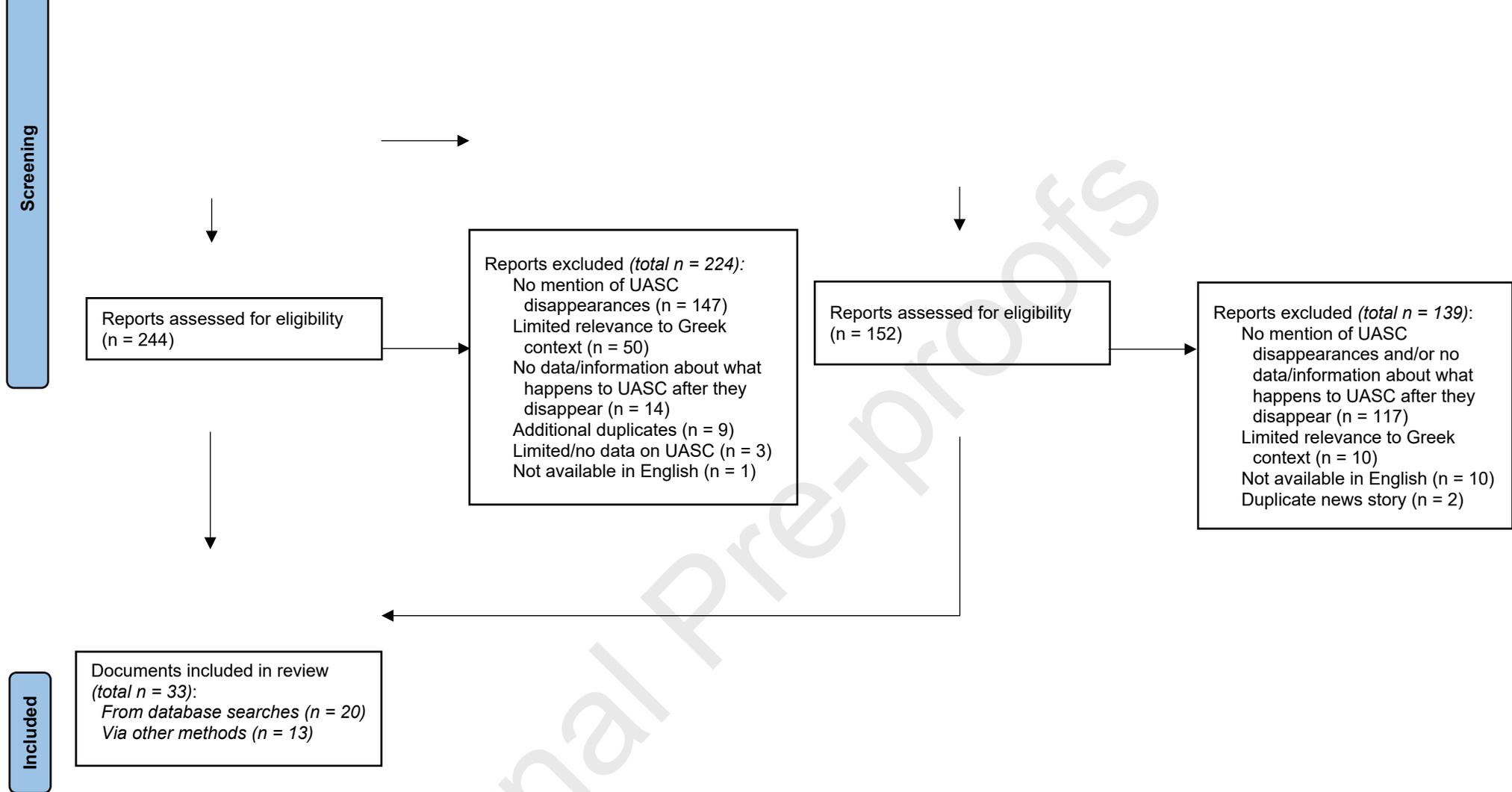
### 5.1. Search results

The original 2021 database searches yielded 990 unique records, and the 2025 updated searches (to identify literature published from 2021 onwards) added an additional 280 results for screening. Of the combined 1,270 records retrieved via database searches, 20 met our inclusion criteria.

One hundred and fifty-two further documents were identified via other methods, including organization reports and publications ( $n = 122$ ), journal articles from selected journals ( $n = 5$ ), documents identified from citation and snowball searching ( $n = 22$ ), and the websites we hand-searched ( $n = 3$ ) (NB. the number 'three' here refers to the number of websites searched; we did not identify any new includable documents from these websites). Of these 152 documents, 13 met our inclusion criteria.

These 13 were added to the 20 from the database searches, giving a final inclusion total of 33. The combined 2014-2025 searches and screening process are detailed in Figure 1.





**Figure 1:** Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses flow diagram. *Source:* Page et al. (2021)

## 5.2. Summary of included documents

The 33 documents included eleven organization reports (Chouzouraki & Gorevan, 2023; European Migration Network [EMN], 2020; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2021; Gkioka & Biswas, 2018; Marouda et al., 2014; Missing Children Europe, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Sarantou & Theodoropoulou, 2019; Save the Children, 2017; UNICEF, 2017), eight news articles (Bouras & Turner, 2015; Fotiadis, 2016; iEidiseis, 2019; Independent Online [IOL], 2015; The Press Project, 2014; Suber & de Stone, 2021; Townsend, 2016; Xinhua News Agency, 2016), eleven primary studies published in academic journals (Digidiki & Bhaba, 2018; Katartzis, 2025; Kourachanis, 2021; Kovner et al., 2021; Lønning, 2020; Lønning, 2024; Melissourgos et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2022; Orsini et al., 2022; Rota et al., 2022), one data brief (IOM & UNICEF, 2015), one doctoral thesis employing qualitative methods (Theocharidou, 2016), and one reflective account of frontline social work with UASC in Greece (Rizopoulou, 2022). The included organization reports were produced by NGOs (Chouzouraki & Gorevan, 2023 [Greek Forum of Refugees, Save the Children]; Gkioka & Biswas, 2018 [Faros]; Sarantou & Theodoropoulou, 2019 [Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung]; Save the Children, 2017; UNICEF, 2017), EU agencies and networks (EMN, 2020; FRA, 2021; Marouda et al., 2014 [EMN]) and an umbrella organization connecting multiple NGOs across Europe (Missing Children Europe, 2016a, 2016b, 2018). The majority of these publications reported on research carried out by the organizations; the two exceptions (Missing Children Europe, 2016a, 2018), which reported annual reviews of the organization's work in Europe, described brief case studies containing data relevant to our research question.

The location and context of these publications varied, with some describing the situation across Greece generally, while others captured data from specific Greek islands and cities. Some publications also described international data; these were only included if the data pertaining to Greece were reported separately. Of the documents reporting minors' demographic characteristics (including research reports that involved UASC as participants, or individual case studies presented within organization reports or news articles), most exclusively reported data about boys. One exception (UNICEF, 2017) acknowledged that girls represented a minority in the focus groups discussions conducted with children ( $n = 130$ ; gender ratio not specified), citing that fewer girls were available to participate. The underrepresentation of girls within our included documents is not surprising; at the time of UNICEF's (2017) publication, despite girls representing 44% of all migrant minors in Greece, only 8% of all UASC were female (National Center for Social Solidarity, 2017). Full details of the demographic profile of the minors within our included documents are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Data extraction**

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Bouras and Turner (2015)	News article	N/A	N/A	Lesvos (island)	N/A
Chouzouraki and Gorevan (2023)	Organization report	To identify the challenges and key legal barriers confronting UASC seeking asylum in Greece.	Report based on in-depth interviews with 12 UASC and an overview of the Greek legal asylum system.	Interviews conducted with UASC in various camps and reception centers across Greece and the Greek islands	n = 12; all between the ages of 10 and 18, including nine boys, two girls and one transgender child identifying as female. Of the nine children quoted in the report, three were from Pakistan, three from Afghanistan, two from Syria, and one from Iraq.
Digidiki and Bhaba (2018)	Journal article	To explore sexual abuse and exploitation of unaccompanied migrant children in Greece, and the risk factors associated with their occurrence.	Qualitative study: 24 in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants in four of the main migrant hosting localities in Greece.	Cities of Athens and Thessaloniki and islands of Chios and Lesvos	N/A (all research participants were key informants and not UASC)

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
European Migration Network (2020)	Organization report (EMN Inform)	To map how cases of unaccompanied children going missing are being treated in EU Member States, and to map how data on missing children is collected.	Data were collected through three EMN 'Ad-Hoc Queries'. Member States provided information on their official policies, procedures and legislative frameworks relevant for the treatment of disappearances of unaccompanied minors.	International (data relating to different EU Member States reported separately); Greek data relate to Greece generally	N/A
Fotiadis (2016)	News article	N/A	N/A	Greece (various locations)	N/A

Author(s), year of publication	Publication type	Aims	Methodology	Location(s) and context	Demographic profile of minor(s)*
FRA (2021)	Organization report	To outline the findings of European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)'s 2019 research with unaccompanied Pakistani children in Greece between 2015 and 2018.	Desk research and a combination of different qualitative approaches, including focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with professionals and Pakistani nationals who had arrived in Greece as unaccompanied children, ethnographic accounts based on overt observations, and informal interviews with unaccompanied Pakistani children and young adults.	Fieldwork focused on four major Greek cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, Ioannina and Patra	<p>Interviews:</p> <p>n = 20; at the time of the interviews, 14 were young adults (aged 18-20) and six were children (aged 16-17) (NB. Although 14 participants were adults at the time of the interviews, the study focused on their experiences of arriving in Greece as unaccompanied minors). All interview participants were Pakistani boys and young men.</p> <p>Ethnographic fieldwork:</p> <p>n = 95; more than half (52 out of 95) described as 'children', with the remaining 43 described as 'young Pakistanis'.</p>

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Gkioka and Biswas (2018)	Organization report	To explore the motivation and experiences that unaccompanied minors have in leaving shelters in Greece, and to explore how caregivers experience absconding and what procedures shelters have in place to support children to stay in care facilities.	Qualitative study employing semi-structured interviews and art to explore unaccompanied minors' and caregivers' experiences related to absconding.	Athens (city)	n = 10; all boys, aged 14-17, from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria
iEidiseis (2019)	News article	N/A	N/A	Igoumenitsa (city)	n = 1; 16-year-old Afghan boy
IOL (2015)	News article	N/A	N/A	Kos (island)	n = 1; 16-year-old Syrian boy
IOM and UNICEF (2015)	Data brief	To examine recent trends in the migration of children to Europe in 2015.	N/A	International (data relating to different European countries reported separately); Greek data relate to Greece generally	N/A

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Katartzi (2025)	Journal article	To advance child-centered understandings of the governmentality of migration, drawing upon a study that ethnographically documented the lived experiences of UASC in Southern European borderlands.	Ethnographically informed research design involving two intensive fieldwork periods, observations, focus groups, repeat in-depth interviews, and informal conversations.	Field sites: two child-only Hospitality Centers/Shelters for UASC in Northern Greece	n = 23; all aged 14-17 (16 males and seven females coming from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt)
Kourachanis (2021)	Journal article	To examine housing and social policies for UASC in Greece.	Qualitative field research based on 14 semi-structured interviews with representatives from international organizations, government bodies, NGOs and migration scholars.	Greece (specific locations not reported)	N/A (no UASC were interviewed in this study)
Kovner, Zehavi and Golan (2021)	Journal article	To examine how shifting local attitudes and migration-management policies shape the migration and integration experiences of UASC in Greece.	Qualitative approach integrating reports by local/international NGOs (containing testimonies of UASC's encounters with authorities in Greece), and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with child protection professionals.	Interviews and focus groups undertaken with NGO staff across Greece and Thessaloniki municipal officials	N/A (no UASC were recruited for this research)

Author(s), year of publication	Publication type	Aims	Methodology	Location(s) and context	Demographic profile of minor(s)*
Lønning (2020)	Journal article	To explore the experiences of journeys and arrival in Europe of young people originating from countries marked by war and conflict, focusing on a case study of a group of young Afghan males in Greece and Norway.	Multi-method approach involving ethnographic fieldwork, creative methods (including photo diaries, written accounts and drawings), and life-history interviews with Afghan males aged 15-24 who had arrived in Greece and Norway between 2008 and 2015.	Patra (city), Greece (four participants) and Norway (23 participants); author also reports spending time with “many other young Afghans, particularly in the Greek port city of Patra, but also in other locations in Greece”.  NB. Only Greek minors’ data used in this review.	n = 4; all Afghan males who arrived in Greece as unaccompanied minors (aged 15-24 at the time of the study)
Lønning (2024)	Journal article	To examine how mobility and immobility interact in the everyday lives of young people on the move, and how protection structures and border regimes shape their trajectories.	Ethnographic, multi-sited research with 15–24 year-old unaccompanied Afghan men, using life histories, semi-structured and informal interviews, participant observation, and a range of visual and textual ‘trail’ sources.	Multi-sited fieldwork predominantly in Greece (Patra [main site], Athens, Piraeus, Chios, Lesbos, Thessaloniki, Idomeni, Evros region), with additional interviews conducted in Norway and shorter trips to Italy and Turkey.  NB. Only data pertaining to minors’ time in Greece used in this review.	n = 11; all males, aged 15-24 at the time of the study, all from Afghanistan

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Marouda et al. (2014)	Organization report (EMN synthesis report)	To explore the situation of UASC who go missing or abscond from reception and/or care facilities in Greece.	National contributions using a Common Template developed by the European Migration Network EMN. Contributions were largely based on desk analysis of existing legislation and policy documents, reports, academic literature, internet resources and reports and information from national authorities and practitioners. Statistics were sourced from Eurostat, national authorities and other (national) databases.	Greece (various locations)	N/A
Melissourgos, Leerkes and Klaassen (2023)	Journal article	To explore the legal and practical obstacles that UASC ‘followers’ face when trying to reunite with family in another EU Member State after arriving in Greece.	Mixed socio-legal methodology including desk research, legal analysis, and semi-structured interviews with former ‘unaccompanied followers’ and workers (lawyers, social workers, and psychologists) of different Greek NGOs and an intergovernmental organization.	Greece (specific locations not reported)	n = 2; both male, ‘former unaccompanied minors’ (ages and nationalities not reported)

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Mishra, Digidiki and Winch (2020)	Journal article	To explore how male unaccompanied migrant children's interactions with child protection staff in Greece shape their future trajectories as migrants.	Qualitative study: semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 youth who were placed in accommodation facilities for unaccompanied minors in Greece.	Recruitment took place in Athens (city), but participants recounted their experiences from time spent in various parts of Greece	n = 22; of whom 14 were from Afghanistan, 5 from Pakistan, 2 from Iran, and 1 from Bangladesh. All participants were male and all had arrived in Greece as unaccompanied minors (aged 18-21 at the time of the study).
Mishra, Digidiki and Winch (2022)	Journal article	To examine how changes in migration patterns and humanitarian assistance policies in response to the 2015–2016 migration crisis in Greece affected UASC's access to shelters in Greece.	In-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 44 male migrant youth, aged 18-21, who arrived in Greece as UASC.	Recruitment took place in Athens (city), but participants recounted their experiences from time spent in various parts of Greece	n = 44; all male, aged 18-21 at the time of the study, predominantly from Afghan and Pakistani backgrounds (with some Iranians and Bangladeshis; exact numbers not reported)

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Missing Children Europe (2016a)	Organization report	To summarise the work, successes and challenges faced by Missing Children Europe in 2016.	N/A	International (data relating to different European countries reported separately); this review presents the case of one boy who arrived in Chios (island) and spent time in various parts of Greece	n = 1; 15-year-old Afghan boy
Missing Children Europe (2016b)	Organization report	To identify good practices and key challenges across the EU in the prevention of, and response to, vulnerable unaccompanied children who go missing from reception centers and other types of care.	Mixed methods study: data collected using 41 online surveys and 17 phone/face-to-face interviews with professionals. (NB. Only survey data obtained from Greece; interviews were carried out in other participating countries. In total, 10 out of the 58 study participants were from Greece.)	International (data relating to different European countries reported separately); this report presents the case of one boy who absconded from a refugee shelter in Greece (specific location not reported)	n = 1; 11-year-old boy (nationality not reported)

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Missing Children Europe (2018)	Organization report	To summarise the work, successes and challenges faced by Missing Children Europe in 2018.	N/A	International (data relating to different European countries reported separately); this review presents the case of one boy who arrived in Athens (city) and spent time in various parts of Greece	n = 1; 17-year-old Afghan boy
Orsini et al. (2022)	Journal article	To analyse how different forms of violence are inflicted on UASC while moving to Europe.	Multi-sited, largely qualitative design combining semi-structured interviews, self-reported questionnaires, and ethnographic observations over time.	International (Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium); relevant data excerpt includes a quote from a 16-year-old boy in Moria	n = ~300 (study total; not broken down according to location); all self-declared ≥ 14 years, with 83% boys and 17% girls. The account of one 16-year-old boy was extracted from this article and used in our analysis (country of origin not reported).
The Press Project (2014)	News article	N/A	N/A	Igoumenitsa (city)	n = 1; Afghan male ‘minor’ (age not specified)

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Rizopoulou (2022)	Journal article	To give an overview of the author's firsthand experience as a social worker in a long-term shelter for UASC in Greece; to illustrate examples from everyday practice through a critical/radical social work lens; and to offer personal reflections and questions aimed at deconstructing the professional tendencies that distance social workers from minors.	A reflective, practice-based narrative drawing on the author's work as a shelter social worker over a one-year period (October 2019-October 2020). No formal data collection beyond auto-ethnographic reflection.	NGO-operated shelter for UASC in Greece (specific location not reported)	All shelter residents were male, aged 13-18, from various backgrounds (Syrian, Palestinian, Afghani, Pakistani)
Rota et al. (2022)	Journal article	To explore how periods of long waiting for permanent documents affect the wellbeing of UASC in the EU.	Longitudinal qualitative design over two years, including semi-structured interviews and self-report questionnaires with UASC, conducted across several EU countries.	Data collection took place in the Greek portion of the project (shelters, reception and detention centers) with follow-ups in Greece or other EU countries depending on each minor's trajectory (specific locations in Greece not reported)	Article focuses on n = 14 case study participants aged 15–17.5 at baseline; gender breakdown and countries of origin not reported (however, the study's initial larger sample consisted of 42 boys and two girls)

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Sarantou and Theodoropoulou (2019)	Organization report	To map and evaluate the sufficiency and progress of the current national protective framework for UASC in Greece; to identify gaps, obstacles, malpractices and other factors undermining inclusion and the well-being of children as experienced by professionals; to provide a tool to capitalize on and share the knowledge and experience attained by professionals and experts in the field, for the benefit of governmental authorities as well as younger practitioners.	Twenty-six interviews with professionals who have worked with UAM for longer than 14 months from 2015 to 2018, using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaires were complemented by desk research, selected bibliography, and indicative case studies provided by experienced practitioners. Additionally, two UASC (by then adults) were interviewed as key informants.	Research conducted with professionals stationed in Lesbos (island), Athens (city), and Chios (island)	N/A (no demographic details provided for the two key informants who travelled to Greece as unaccompanied minors)
Save the Children (2017)	Organization report	To outline how the implementation of the EU-Turkey Deal is adversely affecting child refugees and migrants.	Interviews were conducted with staff from Save the Children and partner organization Praksis, and with refugee and migrant families on the Greek islands.	Greek islands (locations anonymized)	N/A (no UASC were interviewed for this research)

<b>Author(s), year of publication</b>	<b>Publication type</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Location(s) and context</b>	<b>Demographic profile of minor(s)*</b>
Suber and de Stone (2021)	News article	N/A	N/A	Patras (city); article includes accounts from UASC pertaining to time spent in various parts of Greece	n = 3 quoted in article, described as coming from a group of boys aged between 14 and 17, all of whom were from Pakistan, Afghanistan, or north African countries
Theocharidou (2016)	Thesis	To explore the experiences of Afghan UASC in Greece, including their childhoods in their home country, reasons for migration, experiences of crossing borders, and feelings in relation to issues of loss, identity and alienation in transnational contexts, including their experiences as residents in Greece.	Qualitative study involving a purposive sample of 30 unaccompanied Afghan boys aged 15-18, twelve professionals who worked directly with UASC, and nine public figures (including police, a mayor, a priest, an NGO director, social services managers and a public servant). Data collected via group work exercises, focus groups and semi-structured interviews.	Five reception centers located in various parts of Greece (no further details provided to protect participants' anonymity)	n = 30; Afghan boys aged 15-18
Townsend (2016)	News article	N/A	N/A	Indomeni (village near the border with North Macedonia)	n = 3; the stories of two 17-year-old Syrian boys and one 15-year-old Afghan boy were extracted from this article and used in our analysis

Author(s), year of publication	Publication type	Aims	Methodology	Location(s) and context	Demographic profile of minor(s)*
UNICEF (2017)	Organization report	To assess the profiles and experiences of children who arrived in Italy and Greece in 2016 and 2017, why they left home, the risks they encountered on their journeys, and their life once in Europe.	In Greece, a consolidated secondary data analysis of publicly available data was carried out, supplemented by primary data collection, including key informant interviews with 40 parents and 30 service providers, as well as 17 focus group discussions with a total of 130 children, of whom 70 were unaccompanied or separated.	Italy and Greece (findings for each country reported separately); Greek data relate to Greece generally	<p>Secondary data analysis: UASC were mostly boys (92%) and tended to be between 15 and 17 years of age. In 2017, the primary countries of origin of UASC were Pakistan (42%), Afghanistan (19%) and Syria (14%).</p> <p>Primary data: Purposive sample of 130 children, of whom 70 were UASC, aged between 15-17 and from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both boys and girls participated, but girls were fewer in number (exact numbers not reported).</p>
Xinhua News Agency (2016)	News article	N/A	N/A	Athens (city) (NB. Data relate to Greece generally)	N/A

\*For documents reporting research studies with a defined methodology and participant sample, the demographic profile of any minor(s) who participated in the research are reported here. For documents that do not report research studies, and therefore do not contain a defined methodology or participant sample, the data presented here describe the demographic profile of any minor(s) described within the documents to whom our data extraction and analysis relate. For example, the first document (Bouras and

Turner, 2015) is marked 'not applicable' as the data we extracted from this news article did not relate to any individual minors, but rather, to a purported government statistic (see our findings for further details).

Journal Pre-proofs

### 5.3. Patterns

Following content analysis of the 33 included documents, six patterns were identified to answer our research question. The frequency and distribution of these patterns are illustrated in Table 3.

#### i. Onward movement

Of the 33 included documents, 22 described irregular onward movement (attempts to leave Greece via unofficial channels such as across land borders or across the Ionian or Adriatic seas to reach Italy). This was the most frequently occurring pattern, with data from all included source types describing the successful and, more often, unsuccessful attempts of UASC to escape Greece.

The data supporting this finding included first-hand accounts from UASC, obtained from qualitative interviews (FRA, 2021; Gkioka & Biswas, 2018; Melissourgios et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2022; Rota et al., 2022), focus group discussions (UNICEF, 2017), ethnographic fieldwork (Lønning, 2020; Lønning, 2024) and other qualitative methodologies (Theocharidou, 2016). Other first-hand accounts were presented in news articles (Suber & de Stone, 2021; Townsend, 2016) and organization reports (Missing Children Europe, 2016a, 2018), though the source of these data was not always clear. Of all the data supporting this finding, these narratives were perhaps the most helpful for describing how children undertake these onward journeys and what happens to them along the way. In semi-structured interviews, children described absconding from shelters and hiding in trucks (Gkioka & Biswas, 2018) and trailers (Mishra et al., 2020), often with the goal of reaching Italy. Lønning's (2020) ethnographic fieldwork also supported this finding. Conducted mainly in Patra, a Western port city with a large migrant presence, the study described the experiences of UASC who made repeated attempts to escape what they considered to be a hopeless situation in Greece. This assessment appears rational in light of broader understanding of the factors that render children vulnerable to human trafficking (see Bales, 2007; Dhakal Adhikari & Turton, 2019; Hynes, 2010; Turek & Clott, 2017). In one case, following years of attempting to move onwards to Europe—during which time he entered the asylum process in Greece—a young Afghan (age not reported) decided to return to Iran. As Lønning (2020) noted, given the boy's legal status, his only way to make this journey was in the same way he had come: undocumented.

One news article (Bouras & Turner, 2015, para. 11) claimed that government figures indicate that 80% of UASC “end up slipping away to continue their journeys”, though no citation was provided to support this claim, and we were unable to find a primary source to back this finding. Other documents included second-hand accounts from NGO workers (FRA, 2021; Save the Children, 2017) and other professionals working closely with UASC (Digidiki & Bhaba, 2018; Rizopoulou, 2022; Theocharidou, 2016). These accounts often lacked details, and it is likely these individuals were reporting what they assumed to have happened following abscondences. These assumptions would not have been baseless, and it is clear from some accounts that children were open about their intentions to attempt to reach other European countries. Without first-hand evidence, however, it is often impossible to know the fate of these children. An exception is when children are intercepted by authorities during their attempts (IOM & UNICEF, 2015; Missing Children Europe, 2016b) or, tragically, when they are found dead (iEidiseis, 2019; The Press Project, 2014). The latter two sources, both news articles, reported separate instances of Afghan minors found in trucks bound for Italy.

While neither source confirmed that the children were unaccompanied or separated, both indicated that they were found alone.

Only one document (Xinhua News Agency, 2016) described instances of missing children being traced and subsequently assisted to move onwards via official channels. Given our inclusion criteria required evidence of UASC going missing in some way, it is likely that we have not captured the full breadth of evidence describing the ‘regular’ onward movement of previously missing children. That said, we hand searched the website of The Smile of the Child – the NGO reported to have facilitated the tracing of these children – and did not find any includable evidence for our review.

## **ii. Voluntary return to reception centers/shelters**

Only three documents described UASC returning voluntarily to reception centers or shelters following abscondence. The European Migration Network (EMN, 2020), in a report summarizing findings from EMN ad-hoc queries to EU Member States, described the number of UASC officially known to be missing (as well as those subsequently found) in Greece during 2017-2019. The report highlighted the unreliability of these figures, noting that they likely included children who had been reported missing more than once, in addition to children who had returned without notifying authorities. No further details are provided, but given the ‘open system’ approach adopted by many migrant camps (including many that host minors), it is likely that voluntary returns following abscondence are often unaccounted for.

Sarantou and Theodoropoulou (2019) also alluded to voluntary returns. In their report, the authors described findings of a study involving 26 interviews with professionals who worked closely with UASC in various parts of Greece. Again, not much detail was provided on the issue of returns, but the authors noted that some minors are known to “move in and out of shelters at their own will” (p. 66). However, the report also indicated that minors who abscond “are the last to be reassigned a space in shelters” (p. 66).

The only first-hand accounts of voluntary returns came from Theocharidou (2016). Reporting findings from a qualitative study with 30 unaccompanied Afghan boys, multiple participants described returning to reception shelters voluntarily after periods of mobility across Greece, citing reasons such as exhaustion and fear.

## **iii. Captured by authorities**

Twelve documents described UASC being captured by authorities and, in some instances, involuntarily returned to reception centers, shelters or detention. In their report, the FRA (2021) described the case of a 15-year-old Pakistani boy who was apprehended by police after escaping a precarious living situation, before being placed in protective custody and later in “proper accommodation” (p. 34). Six documents (Gkioka & Biswas, 2018; Lønning, 2024; Mishra et al., 2020; Missing Children Europe, 2016a, 2016b; Theocharidou, 2016) described UASC being apprehended by authorities during their attempts to escape Greece via land or sea, with all but one (Gkioka & Biswas, 2018) indicating that the minors were returned to shelters or camps. In the first-hand account provided by Gkioka and Biswas (2018), though the minor described being “taken to a room” and “handcuffed” (p. 20), no further details were provided.

In first-hand accounts reported by Theocharidou (2016) and Townsend (2016), minors were intercepted by police following successful attempts to move beyond the Greek borders.

Participants in Theocharidou's (2016) qualitative study described their encounters with Italian authorities after crossing the sea with the help of smugglers. Though the boys' accounts did not indicate that the authorities were violent or forceful, the author noted that this summary expulsion was in violation of Italian and international law. Townsend (2016) reported the stories of multiple boys absconding from what was described as an "improvised refugee camp" (p. 22) in Idomeni, a northern village close to the Macedonian border. The report was published shortly after Macedonia closed its border, and the boys' accounts detailed violent encounters with police and military personnel before their forceful returns back into Greece.

Violence was a common theme within minors' accounts of their encounters with authorities, including within the Greek borders. This included instances of violence experienced personally (Gkioka & Biswas, 2018; Kovner et al., 2021; Theocharidou, 2016; Townsend, 2016) and rumors heard from others (Theocharidou, 2016). In all accounts, the descriptions of violence were extreme, with one child recalling how he was hit so hard that he "couldn't stand up for a week" (Theocharidou, 2016, p. 144). Treatment as suspect, let alone subjection to brutality by authorities fundamentally undermines any potential to work with groups such as the USAC (see Bashir, 2023, p. 52 and 85 et seq.).

#### **iv. Remain in Greece (unofficially)**

Multiple documents reported evidence of UASC remaining in Greece in circumstances not captured by official records (that is, outside of the child protection system or any other system within which they could be 'accounted for'). For some, this involved making informal accommodation arrangements and/or finding casual work, often under dangerous or exploitative conditions. Missing Children Europe (2018) reported the case of a 17-year-old Afghan boy who bypassed reception procedures and was taken directly to a dorm run by the smugglers he had travelled with, where he was charged to stay. In their research on unaccompanied Pakistani minors in Greece, the FRA (2021) reported that it was not uncommon for children to "rely on the hospitality of other Pakistanis" (p. 34). The report described instances of minors moving in with adults they had met in Greece or online, with most being asked to pay their way or perform housework as repayment for the hospitality. An NGO worker also reported cases of children being asked to offer sexual favors in exchange for their accommodation, echoing accounts from other professionals (Suber & de Stone, 2021) and even first-hand accounts from minors (Mishra et al., 2022). In other instances, children were reported to abscond from refugee camps in order to move in with relatives who had found accommodation elsewhere in Greece (FRA, 2021).

Other documents reported instances of UASC undertaking casual work during their time in Greece, often after absconding from shelters or camps and finding informal accommodation. This was described by first- and second-hand accounts in research by the FRA (2021), Lønning (2020), Mishra et al. (2022), Missing Children Europe (2018) and Theocharidou (2016). The majority of examples given described agricultural or casual labor work and, frequently, exploitative working conditions. In a case described by the FRA (2021), an unaccompanied Pakistani child reported extreme variations in the payment he received for his labor at different times throughout the year.

In their ethnographic study, Lønning (2020) discussed the significance of immobility within the journeys of many UASC in Greece. In other words, a time in limbo during which children remain undocumented (or outside of the systems designed to accommodate them), moving back and forth between different parts of the country looking for work, accommodation or a

means of escape into other European countries. Theocharidou (2016) similarly described the “transitional period” (p. 154) UASC experience—often after their ‘white papers’ expire and they face the risk of deportation—wherein minors travel frequently in search of opportunities to work or move onwards. As children remain hidden during this transitional period, we have termed this ‘invisible immobility’ (see Table 3). In Theocharidou’s (2016) qualitative study, children described their experiences of spending up to one year in a town or city before moving onwards (or sometimes backwards). In the first-hand accounts provided by minors, it was evident that these transitional periods were characterized by great stress and uncertainty, and, in some cases, homelessness (Lønning, 2020; Theocharidou, 2016).

Evidence from eight documents also reported minors’ experiences of homelessness (Fotiadis, 2016; FRA, 2021; Katartzi, 2025; Kourachanis, 2021; Kovner et al., 2021; Lønning, 2024; Mishra et al., 2022; Rizopoulou, 2022). In their report, the FRA (2021) detailed the first-hand accounts of UASC who became homeless for a number of reasons, including refusal to comply with the demands of their informal ‘landlords’; to join relatives (an example was provided of two children who left their accommodation facility in order to join a cousin who was living in an abandoned factory); or simply due to lack of options as they travelled across the country. In a news article, Fotiadis (2016) reported an encounter with a social worker who indicated that UASC will often resort to living on the streets in order to avoid being sent to official facilities.

Lastly, a report by the FRA (2021) described instances of unaccompanied Pakistani minors being abducted by smugglers and confined in warehouses. This experience was reported by several minors in semi-structured interviews, with one excerpt indicating that the children had been transported by smugglers directly to the location where they were confined, with authorities only becoming aware of their presence after one individual was able to escape and alert the police. The report included a quotation from a child protection worker who commented that the issue of abductions was encountered “almost exclusively with Pakistanis” (p. 22), though no further information was provided to explain this. Only one other article alluded to abductions: a social worker in Kovner et al.’s (2021, p. 1758) study was quoted as saying, “The ones [UASC] who live in the streets are in survival mode ... [they] will never admit to being involved in sexual exploitation, so often they become victims of blackmail [...]. In cases of abduction, if the family does not have money, they agree that the child will work for them in any kind of work to pay the debt.” The nexus between smuggling and trafficking is well known, if often the subject of confusion, even within expert law enforcement communities (see van der Leun & van Schijndel, 2016).

#### **v. Death**

Of the included documents, three reported the deaths of UASC in Greece (iEidiseis, 2019; IOL, 2015; The Press Project, 2014). All three were news articles, and little information or context was provided. As described earlier in our findings, two of these articles reported the cases of minors found in trucks bound for Italy (iEidiseis, 2019; The Press Project, 2014). The third article (IOL, 2015) reported that the body of a 16-year-old Syrian boy was found after he was left behind by the group he had been travelling with. This article specified that the boy had been smuggled from Turkey, and indicated that though the boy was with a group, he was not travelling with family. These three pieces of evidence capture a small fragment of what is undoubtedly a much larger, and sadly unknowable, number of UASC lives lost in Greece.

#### **vi. We don’t know**

Though this last finding is perhaps self-evident, we felt it was important to capture what was, in three documents, reported as an explicit lack of data on UASC disappearances. In a synthesis report outlining nationally sourced statistics, Marouda et al. (2014) reported that no authorities were systematically recording data on UASC disappearances. Though perhaps not surprising – given the rationale for our scoping review – we were still struck by this report. Other documents also alluded to this lack of data on a smaller scale, including the absence of audit data to monitor children’s abscondence from refugee camps (Townsend, 2016) and non-systematic recording of dropouts from the child reception system (UNICEF, 2017). Again, these three documents outline what is undoubtedly a much broader body of evidence describing the absence of data on UASC disappearances in Greece. In fact, Marouda et al. (2014) noted in their report that The Smile of the Child, a Greek NGO, had recently begun recording UASC disappearances in a separate category at the time of their report’s publication. Yet, as noted earlier, we did not discover any includable evidence in our hand searches of the NGO’s website, suggesting that this evidence is either incomplete or inaccessible.

**Table 3: Patterning table**

Articles /Patterns	Onward movement		Return to shelters/ camps voluntarily	Captured by authorities	Remain in Greece (unofficially)				Death	We don't know
	Regular	Irregular			Invisible immobility	Find accommodation and/or work	Homelessness	Abducted and confined		
1 Bouras and Turner (2015)		x								
2 Chouzouraki and Gorevan (2023)				x	x	x				
3 Digidiki and Bhabha (2018)		x								
4 European Migration Network (2020)			x							
5 Fotiadis (2016)								x		

6 FRA (2021)	x	x	x	x	x
7 Gkioka and Biswas (n.d.)	x	x			
8 iEidiseis (2019)	x				x
9 IOL (2015)					x
10 IOM and UNICEF (2015)	x				
11 Katartzi (2025)		x			x
12 Kourachanis (2021)				x	x
13 Kovner, Zehavi and Golan (2021)		x	x	x	x

14 Lønning (2020)	x		x		x		x
15 Lønning (2024)	x		x		x		x
16 Marouda et al. (2014)							x
17 Melissourgos, Leerkes and Klaassen (2023)	x				x		
18 Mishra, Digidiki and Winch (2020)	x		x				
19 Mishra, Digidiki and Winch (2022)	x		x		x		x
20 Missing Children Europe (2016a)	x		x				

21 Missing Children Europe (2016b)	x	x		
22 Missing Children Europe (2018)	x		x	
23 Orsini et al. (2022)			x	
24 The Press Project (2014)	x			x
25 Rizopoulou (2022)	x			x
26 Rota et al. (2022)	x			
27 Sarantou and Theodoropoulou (2019)			x	

28 Save the Children (2017)	x						
29 Suber and de Stone (2021)	x				x		
30 Theocharidou (2016)	x	x	x	x	x	x	
31 Townsend (2016)	x			x			x
32 UNICEF (2017)	x						x
33 Xinhua News Agency (2016)	x						

## 6. Discussion

This scoping review identified 33 documents that evidenced, to various extents, what is happening to UASC who go missing while travelling through the migrant streams in Greece. Only three of the documents identified from the original searches (2021) were primary empirical studies published in academic journals, with the majority of data coming from organization reports and news articles. However, having updated the searches to account for 2021-2025, it is clear there has been an explosion in interest and scholarly attention to this issue, which is promising. The institutionalization of Greece's National Emergency Response Mechanism in 2022 reflects a shift towards more proactive, coordinated responses for protecting UASC, and while an official evaluation has not yet been published, figures reported to the European Commission suggest positive early impacts (European Commission, n.d.[a]).

The extensive literature screened during the process of conducting this scoping review almost universally described ongoing uncertainty and considerable risk for UASC arriving in Greece. Following what were frequently traumatic journeys to Europe, many UASC found their prospects became increasingly uncertain upon arrival in Greece, facing complex and lengthy asylum application processes, limited access to information, insecure accommodation, and ongoing risks of abuse and exploitation.

It was not surprising that the most frequently occurring pattern in our findings was 'irregular onward movement', with 22 of the 33 included documents describing minors' successful and unsuccessful attempts to leave Greece via unofficial channels (see Table 3). In their analysis of qualitative interview data, Gkioka and Biswas (2018) detailed various 'pull' and 'push' factors underpinning minors' decisions to move onwards: for example, a desire to meet relatives in other countries (pull) and dissatisfaction with their circumstances in Greece (push). It was clear from these data that the children were aware of the dangers of absconding and attempting to move onwards, yet many also indicated that the decision to move onwards was easy, with one participant stating: "We have come through many difficulties, that is why we are taking the risk to encounter the dangers in front of our eyes" (Gkioka & Biswas, 2018, p. 20). Our findings thus also highlight the importance of the Palermo Protocol (UN General Assembly, 2000) deeming any form of survivor consent irrelevant to the criminalization of human traffickers. While there is a significant body of literature discussing the vulnerabilities of UASC, many have also argued that this conceptualization is at odds with the resilience and agency that these children demonstrate during their journeys, and that failure to recognize this fact risks reinforcing their vulnerability (Digidiki & Bhaba, 2018; Mustaniemi-Laakso et al., 2016; Peroni & Timmer, 2013). Peroni and Timmer (2013) argued that vulnerability is both descriptive and prescriptive in this way, and that "the bridge [between these powers] is not easy to build" (p. 1059). This analogy resonates with the circumstances of many UASC in Greece, whose experiences are often proof of a system that reinforces one of two extremes: powerlessness (by detaining, abusing and denying access to asylum procedures) or abandonment (through illegal pushbacks, systematic failures in age assessment, and in some cases, literal abandonment; see Theocharidou, 2016).

During the course of conducting this scoping review, we sought to consolidate information about the legal situation in Greece regarding the proper procedures for the reception of UASC. Our goal was to present this in such a way as to contextualize the experiences of minors arriving in Greece according to official procedures (i.e. what *should* happen upon their arrival) at different points in time, anticipating that many minors who 'go missing' have bypassed these procedures in some way. At first, this was a challenging task; the narratives

we were reading did not seem to fit, and the paucity of evidence made it difficult to see why this was. However, as we became more familiar with the literature it became increasingly clear that what ‘should’ happen is very rarely what actually happens. This can be seen in evidence describing minors’ experiences throughout various stages of their journeys to and through Greece, from poorly enforced reception and identification procedures to inappropriate and sometimes illegal accommodation conditions. For example, despite Greece abolishing the detention of UASC as a means of protective custody (Law 4760/2020, effective since December 2020, as cited in AIDA, 2022a), Greek government statistics illustrate breaches of this law (National Center for Social Solidarity, 2021). Prior to this abolition, reports from nongovernmental groups showed that UASC were being detained with unrelated adults, violating national and international law (Human Rights Watch, 2020). A number of Greek laws (including the initial version of Law 4554/2018, passed in July 2018, and subsequent amendments) set out a regulatory framework for the guardianship and legal representation of UASC in Greece, yet evidence continues to demonstrate that these systems are not functional in practice, leaving many children without representation to safeguard their best interests (AIDA, 2022b). Given the repeated failures of the systems designed to protect them, it is unsurprising that so many children decide to pursue their own paths, whether with the goal of reaching other European countries or living and supporting themselves independently in Greece. It is important to note, however, that the intention of such protective systems are routinely found to flounder. They are consistently trumped by anti-immigration concerns and so, even at the highest level, have contradictory impulses woven into their legislative frameworks (Haynes 2023; Krieg, 2009). The UASC are but one of the vulnerable groups suffering the consequences.

At a glance, the high hit rate of the pattern ‘irregular onward movement’ might be interpreted to mean this is the most common reason for UASC disappearances. However, it is important to consider the nature of the data we have analyzed, and the context within which they were collected and reported. Ultimately, given the hidden nature of this phenomenon, it is inevitable that certain narratives are more likely to survive and resurface, where others will be predisposed to remain hidden or lost. The fact that UASC abscond from reception centers and other formal accommodation facilities is well documented (Gkioka & Biswas, 2018), but how many succeed in their efforts to leave Greece, find work and accommodation locally, or fall victim to organized crime (for example, human trafficking) is less clear (but all too likely; Rodriguez-Lopez, 2020). While we encountered data confirming that some UASC return to their accommodation facilities voluntarily and, more often, involuntarily following capture by authorities, these data were anecdotal. A report by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, 2019) acknowledged that reception centers and other accommodation facilities hosting UASC adopt an ‘open system’ approach, allowing children to enter and leave freely, making it impossible to keep an accurate population census. Interestingly, a report by EMN (2020) noted that all referral actors, including police and NGOs, have a mandatory reporting duty for all UASC abscondences, though it is unclear to what extent this duty is fulfilled. Therefore, though systems are in place to facilitate the reporting of UASC disappearances—such as a hotline operated by the NGO Smile of the Child, or Amber Alert Hellas, a national alert system (EMN, 2020)—their utility will inevitably be limited by referral actors’ awareness of any disappearances and/or compliance with reporting duties.

Beyond the evidence of UASC returning to their accommodation facilities, multiple documents in this review reported instances of UASC remaining ‘unofficially’ in Greece, detailing periods of frequent travel, homelessness, informal living and work arrangements,

and in two reports, cases of abduction and involuntary confinement or blackmail. Again, that minors decide to leave (or entirely avoid) official accommodation facilities in favor of independent living and work opportunities is not surprising. In addition to the dysfunctional reception and guardianship processes already described, there is a great deal of evidence indicating that minors' integration prospects are limited (UNHCR, 2017). For example, despite UASC being required under Greek law (Law 4636/2019, effective since January 2020) to attend school, evidence demonstrates that migrant minors' access to education is inconsistent (AIDA, 2022c; UNICEF, 2020), with recent data indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this issue (Refugee Support Aegean, 2021). With limited access to the Greek public school system, UASC become increasingly segregated, impacting their social and economic prospects both within and beyond Greece. Further, without access to the support systems offered by legal guardians and educational professionals, UASC become increasingly exposed to exploitation. These findings chime all too well with knowledge reflected in literature on human trafficking, highlighting the gulf between the flexibility of those seeking to exploit vulnerable populations and the fundamental flaws of systems intended to protect them (Demeke, 2024; Fouladvand, 2018).

We encountered numerous articles alluding to the trafficking of UASC, yet very few provided evidence for this, with the majority describing the 'risks' or 'likelihood' rather than incidence. Again, given the covert nature of this activity, we had not expected to find a wealth of information, but the near absence of any data was surprising. Greece was placed on Tier 2 of the United States Government's 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report, as it was again in 2024 – an annual analysis of international anti-trafficking efforts – indicating that despite increasing efforts, the Greek government failed to meet minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking (United States Department of State, 2021). The report highlighted that insufficient effort is being made to screen for trafficking at entry points across Greece, and narratives such as the one described in the FRA (2021) report illustrate the potential fate of child victims of trafficking in Greece. Further, a lawyer who participated in a focus group for the aforementioned study noted that despite the existence of mechanisms to report trafficking, there are no facilities to host child victims (p. 22), suggesting that these children are afforded little additional protection. Though the brief case study presented in the FRA report indicated that the minors had not come into contact with Greek authorities prior to their escape, it is clear that UASC who enter the asylum system are still exposed to exploitation and abuse, whether at the hands of traffickers or the authorities responsible for their protection.

During the early stages of our analysis, we coded documents for evidence of UASC facing danger and exploitation during their time outside of the asylum process. However, on reflection, we realized that this attempt to quantify the danger faced by these children was reductive. Whether or not it was described explicitly, the danger was self-evident, and it became clear that children often faced danger, exploitation and abuse *within* the asylum process as well as outside. There is extensive evidence describing instances of UASC experiencing violence from police at various points during their journeys (Gkioka & Biswas, 2018; Kovner et al., 2021; Theocharidou, 2016; Townsend, 2016), or from other asylum seekers within Greek reception facilities and shelters. Sources cite overcrowding, lack of security and mixing of child and adult populations as drivers of the problem (Digidiki & Bhaba, 2018; IFRC, 2019; UNHCR, 2015). When UASC abscond or bypass official reception procedures, they face abuse and exploitation by informal employers and accommodation hosts (FRA, 2021), smugglers (Theocharidou, 2016) and even regular citizens, with some sources highlighting instances of racially motivated attacks against

migrant children (Lønning, 2020). These narratives expose a small fragment of the ongoing danger UASC face in Greece – a reality most had not anticipated within Europe – and the scarcity of complete or reliable data on the issue of UASC disappearances is further evidence of the dysfunction of the systems designed to protect them. This is all the more worrying given the wealth of knowledge relating to relevant risk factors (Franchino-Olsen, 2019) and indeed potentially more promising protective approaches (Fouladvand, 2018). It is clear that UASC possess a remarkable amount of determination, competence and agency, and a system that fails to account for and nurture these qualities will continue to perpetuate the invisibility of these children, the risks to which they are exposed, and the consequences thereof.

It is beyond the scope of this review to make specific recommendations for practice or policy. First, scoping review methodologies do not generally seek to provide solutions, given their aim of ascertaining the scope (rather than quality or value) of the available evidence in a given field (Grant & Booth, 2009). Second, Greek asylum procedures operate within complex multilevel frameworks, and with a multitude of administrative, economic and political factors impacting on their organizational structures and processes. Given the situational complexity, it is likely that any strategies for change will depend on strengthened interagency cooperation (see Loschi & Slominski, 2022). Nevertheless, this review has identified a significant literature gap, and our findings provide an important step towards identifying the areas into which research is needed most urgently. In particular, primary qualitative methods will provide a valuable avenue for engaging UASC and relevant stakeholders on the ground. From a policy perspective, it is our hope that findings from this review will bring renewed attention to the situation facing UASC among relevant European agencies and bodies. We note that the recently published Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (European Commission, 2020a) and EU Anti-racism Action Plan (European Commission, 2020b) pay little attention to unaccompanied minors, despite their increasing numbers. In light of our review's findings, we suggest that now is an opportune time to discuss the under-protection of UASC within Europe.

### **6.1. Limitations**

Our findings are limited by the quality of the data we have included. As already highlighted, only eleven of the 33 documents were empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals. Much of the data we analyzed came from NGO organization reports – which, though often derived from primary studies conducted by the NGOs, were usually incomplete in their presentation – and from news articles. We had not expected to present a complete analysis of every fate befalling UASC who go missing in Greece. The aim of this scoping review was to identify and collate any existing evidence that answers our research question, and the paucity of reliable data is a finding in itself. This is reflected still in the dearth of up-to-date information available even to the highest political levels (see reporting on the situation on trafficking in human beings in Greece: European Commission, n.d.[b]).

It is possible that we missed relevant evidence not available in English. Though we had hoped to involve a researcher who could translate Greek documents into English, the vast scope of the literature screened for this review, and the significant amount of time required for this, meant that additional screening of Greek language documents was not plausible. This limitation was mitigated to an extent by the extensiveness of our screening strategy, including hand searches of various national and international governmental and organization websites (translated into English where required using Google's translation function; though not ideal, this approach enabled us to rule out the possibility of missing relevant publications and statistics, which if available, would have been followed up). Lastly, while we acknowledge

the potential value of utilizing qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) programs, we do not consider our decision to opt for manual coding to be a limitation, nor is this approach unusual in qualitative or narrative literature review methodologies (Woods et al., 2016).

## 7. Conclusion

This scoping review casts a light on the underexplored issue of what happens to UASC who go missing while in or transiting through Greece. Despite a wealth of evidence answering the question of *why* these children go missing, this review found that little has been published to address the issue of what happens following their disappearances. As a major hub for migrants escaping conflict and persecution, it is extremely concerning that data on UASC disappearances in Greece are so incomplete, and more troubling still that children are clearly facing sustained breaches of their human rights upon entry into Europe. It is undeniable that huge efforts are being made by various groups to safeguard the wellbeing of UASC in Greece, including the many NGOs upon whom migrants have come to rely to meet basic needs. Strengthening national policies, improving compliance with existing legislation, and enhancing coordination between public and voluntary sectors could significantly improve protections for UASC across Europe. It is our hope that the findings from this review will bring renewed attention to this important issue and raise questions among researchers and policy makers.

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### **Disclosure statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.