

16126 Migrant crisis: More than 10,000 children 'missing'

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More than 10,000 migrant children may have disappeared after arriving in Europe over the past two years, the European Union's police intelligence unit says. Thousands of vulnerable minors had vanished after registering with state authorities. Europol warned of children and young people being forced into sexual exploitation and slavery by criminal gangs.

The organization Save the Children says some 26,000 child migrants arrived in Europe last year without any family.

It is the first time Europol has given a Europe-wide estimate of how many might be missing.

"We're looking at 10,000-plus children," said Europol's chief of staff.

"Not all of them will be criminally exploited; some might have been passed on to family members. We just don't know where they are, what they're doing or whom they are with."

A Europol spokesman said a large proportion may have also disappeared after landing in Greece. The country is the first entry point for most of the 1 million migrants who arrived in Europe by boat in 2015, and authorities have been criticised for failing to register the arrivals.

Criminal gangs known to be involved in human trafficking in Europe are targeting refugees. There are fears unaccompanied children and young people may be dragged into sex work, slavery and other illegal activity.

The International Organization for Migration spokesman said that many of the missing would be caught up in exploitation and that the European Union should put the resources into finding the children, helping them and reuniting them with their families."

A member of the Italian charity On The Road said that there is a very short window of time to provide unaccompanied minors arriving in Europe with a safe haven. By law, they are allowed out of reception centres during the day, when they easily fall prey to organised crime or individuals looking to exploit them. Few centres have enough translators who speak the children's languages. They do not employ staff experienced in spotting victims of sexual exploitation. Feeling uncertain and unprotected, thousands of children have run away from Italian reception centres, disappearing on to the streets. With no one stepping in or taking responsibility for them, they're left to fend for themselves - doing what it takes to survive.

The warning from Europol comes days after the UK government said it would accept more unaccompanied child refugees from Syria and other conflict zones. However, it said it would not be taking in vulnerable children who had already made it into Europe.

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