

LOST AND ALONE:

Addressing the Crisis of
Unaccompanied and Separated
Children in Post-Earthquakes
Northwest Syria and Southern Türkiye

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Lead Authors: Delphine Valette (Independent Consultant), Balquees Bsharat (Advocacy Adviser), and Hamzah Barhameyeh in his capacity as Advocacy and Communications Manager.

Contributors:

We extend our appreciation to Evita Jourdi, Ghida Krisht, Mike Kirakossian, Maher Alshdaifat, Rola Makhadmeh, Ashraf Al Kilani, Clynton Beukes, and Leah Donoghue, whose insights and contributions were invaluable. Special thanks are also due to the members of the World Vision MEAL team for their support.

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Design and Proofreading:

- Designed by Diana De León

- Proofread by Charles Lawley

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ACRONYMS

FGD	Focus group discussion
FTS	Financial Tracking Service
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDP	Internally displaced persons
I/NNGO	International and national non-governmental organisation
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NWS	Northwest Syria
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UASC	Unaccompanied and separated children
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
3RP	Refugee, Resilience Regional Plan



A father and son trying to salvage their belongings from their destroyed home in Syria after the earthquake. © World Vision Syria Response, External Consultant

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings from a unique piece of research conducted by World Vision Syria Response in Northwest Syria (NWS) and Southern Türkiye. It is the first of its kind to specifically explore how the February 2023 earthquakes in the region have impacted unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) and who were separated from their families during the disasters. The study brings together the diverse perspectives and experiences of caregivers, community members and most importantly, Syrian UASC in some of the worst earthquakes-affected areas. The report underlines the critical role of community-based alternative care systems in caring for unaccompanied and separated children and emphasises the severe gaps in existing services for children without parental care. Finally, it calls for increased prioritisation of Syrian unaccompanied and separated children in both NWS and Southern Türkiye in the overall humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict.

The earthquakes that struck NWS and Southern Türkiye on the 6th of February 2023 killed over 56,000 people¹ and affected a staggering 26

million people² including at least 7 million children, in some way.³ These disasters decimated critical infrastructure and destroyed building and houses, leaving millions homeless and without access to lifesaving services. The earthquakes caused physical, mental and emotional harm, wiped out families and livelihoods, and worsened the impacts of overlapping crises that were already severely causing immense hardship to some of the most vulnerable populations. In NWS, children and their families have been enduring years of conflict and violence and deteriorating living conditions. In Southern Türkiye, Syrian refugee children have been bearing the brunt of the socio-economic impacts of multiple shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's near economic collapse, and which have aggravated society's increasingly negative and hostile attitudes towards the millions of forcibly displaced who have fled war.⁴

While in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, family separation was reported as significant concern in the NWS and Southern Türkiye, the lack of data on unaccompanied and

separated children, and their extreme vulnerability was also highlighted by humanitarian actors. Yet, very little attention was paid on addressing the needs of existing unaccompanied and separated children and those at risk or that lost parents and carers in the disasters, with those “invisible” children falling through the cracks of the response. What is more, the distinct needs and heightened vulnerability of some groups of unaccompanied and separated children, including Syrian refugee children in Southern Türkiye, was absent from the narrative and meagre data collected that did not include details on the gender, disability or refugee status of UASC. UASC both as a group, and in their diversity, are largely invisible.

The research provides critical new evidence on the situation of unaccompanied and separated children in NWS and in Syrian refugee communities in Southern Türkiye. It highlights the alarming data gap on unaccompanied and separated children, and makes a strong case for specific actions, programmes and policies that protect unaccompanied and separated children, and support informal care arrangements in the region.

Key trends across both regions

Although the contexts in NWS and Southern Turkey are different, the research identified common trends that should be considered in the planning and delivery of regional strategies for unaccompanied and separated children.



The data gap on unaccompanied and separated children in both NWS and Southern Türkiye is shocking. There is virtually no data on their situation and number. When data is available, it is not disaggregated. This compounds the perception of this group of children as being “homogenous” and does not account for the specific needs of boys, girls, and those with disabilities.



The impacts of the earthquakes have significantly increased unaccompanied and separated children’s protection risks, including child marriage, child labour and severe mental health issues. However, they lack vital access to effective services to address their needs.



Family-based care – kinship care specifically – is the main form of alternative care in both regions, with extended families and friends caring for UASC after the earthquakes.



Caregivers struggle to cope with the financial and psychological impacts of overlapping crises but are receiving insufficient assistance including financial aid and mental health support.



In both regions, community members believe that the most important longer-term strategy needed for address the needs of unaccompanied and separated children is the provision of essential services such as food, housing, and education.

Key findings NWS



The number of unaccompanied and separated children has increased after the earthquakes: 67% of community members report knowing many unaccompanied and separated children in their areas who have lost parental care in the earthquakes, with no significant differences between Aleppo and Idlib.



More caregivers look after or provide support to separated children than unaccompanied children. Around half (48%) of caregivers across both governorates look after separated children regularly or on a limited basis, compared with 24% who look after unaccompanied children regularly and 34% in a limited capacity. In Idlib, over two-thirds (68%) of caregivers do not have experience caring for unaccompanied children, compared with (16%) in Aleppo.



The impact of the earthquakes on caregivers’ existing financial challenges and mental health are impacting caregivers’ ability to provide support and look after unaccompanied and separated children. Financial support in particular is extremely limited (12% in Aleppo and 4% in Idlib).



The disasters have compounded UASC's existing vulnerabilities and prompted new ones, with girls perceived to be disproportionately affected by the disasters, due to their status in society and gender norms, according to 84% of community members across both governorates. Child marriage, child labour, exploitation and poor mental health have emerged as increasing protection concerns for unaccompanied and separated children.



Cultural and societal norms influence the protection of unaccompanied and separated children negatively or positively, depending on the location. In Aleppo, a large majority (73%) perceive them as having a "highly negative" or "somewhat negative" influence on the protection of UASC, compared with a great majority (92%) of respondents in Idlib believing cultural norms and societal attitudes have a positive influence on the protection of UASC in their community, with religious values for example, fostering a caring and protective environment.



Child marriage has increased since the earthquakes. 40% of caregivers from across the two governorates said that they are aware of child marriages of unaccompanied and separated children in the aftermath of the disasters. A higher proportion of community members (73%) also reported noticing an increase in child marriage, especially in Idlib (85%), reflecting the higher risks of child marriage for unaccompanied and separated girls (but also some boys) in that governorate.



The earthquakes pushed more children to work and out of school, amplifying an existing learning crisis.

- 73.2% of community members in Aleppo and Idlib reported that child labour has increased primarily due to worsening living conditions.

Caregivers in both governorates said that economic need (49%) and family loss (26%) were the primary reasons for children engaging in child labour after the earthquakes.



Caregivers (44%) and community members (67%) from both governorates reported that the earthquakes disrupted children's education "moderately". More caregivers in Aleppo (44%) highlighted stronger disruptions than in Idlib (31%) but more community members in Idlib (81%) reported the same trend than in Aleppo (54%).



The already significant mental health needs of unaccompanied and separated children worsened after the earthquakes. 74% of caregivers in both governorates identified persistent signs of psychosocial distress, sadness, loss of interest in activities, low energy, intense worries or anxiety related to the earthquakes as the top concerns for children since the earthquakes, although a higher number of respondents (84%) in Idlib than in Aleppo (64%) were concerned about the mental health of children.



The needs of UASC are not being met by the current level of assistance and support provided.

- 54% of caregivers said that UASC's mental health as well as psychosocial and financial needs are not being met.
- A large majority of community members in Idlib (69%) and Aleppo (65%) think that existing child protection services including MHPSS, financial support and housing, do not address key protection risks for unaccompanied and separated children (such as child marriage and child labour – including exploitation and trafficking).

Key findings Southern Türkiye



The number of UASC in Syrian refugee communities has increased after the earthquakes, **with 80% of community members reporting they know of many UASC in their community who became separated or unaccompanied during the earthquakes.**



Caregivers and community members' experience caring for separated and unaccompanied children vary significantly depending on the location.

- **100% of caregivers in Şanlıurfa and 90% in Kilis and Gaziantep** look after separated children regularly compared with 0% in Hatay and 30% in Adiyaman. where caregivers look after them in a limited capacity (60% and 70% respectively).
- While 90% of caregivers in Gaziantep care for unaccompanied children regularly, less than half of respondents in other locations – including 0% in Şanlıurfa - do so.
- A large majority of community members in Adiyaman (82%) and Hatay (80%) provide care for unaccompanied children in a limited capacity and/or indirectly compared with 80% of community members in Şanlıurfa who care for unaccompanied children regularly.



Assistance and support for caregivers is insufficient. 44% of caregivers across locations do not receive any assistance for the children they look after, with those in Hatay and Adiyaman receiving the least support. MHPSS and awareness sessions (22%) and financial support (20%) are the main forms of support provided to caregivers, although it is only in Sanliurfa that financial support is provided to a large majority (70%) of caregivers (compared to 10-20% in other locations).



Caregivers' financial hardship and poor mental health are affected their ability to look after UASC, with wide variations between locations. In Adiyaman, a staggering 90% of



caregivers reported being mentally affected by the disasters, while 60% of respondents in Şanlıurfa struggle to cope with increased financial challenges.

The earthquakes have exacerbated unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children's vulnerabilities and protection risks. 44% and 56% of caregivers across the five provinces think that the earthquakes impacted unaccompanied or separated girls and boys "moderately". Girls are also believed to be more disproportionately affected by the disasters than boys by 90% of community members across locations.



Cultural and societal norms negatively influence the protection of unaccompanied and separated children.

- 44% of caregivers across locations also reported that cultural norms and society attitudes had a highly negative or somewhat negative impact on the protection of UASC, with a higher percentage of respondents in Kilis (80%).
- The positive influence of cultural beliefs and social attitudes on the protection of UASC was however highlighted by 60% of caregivers in Hatay.



Case of child marriage went up after the earthquakes due to deteriorating living conditions, although there are significant differences between locations.

- **60% of caregivers across locations reported not being aware of any child marriages among UASC after the earthquakes, but there are wide variations between locations. In Sanliurfa especially, 60% of respondents were aware of new child marriages** following the disasters, followed by 40% of caregivers in Hatay and Kilis.
- While 65% of community members across all locations did not report any increase in risks of child marriage after the earthquakes, 70% of respondents in Kilis thought that

more children were at risk of getting married early.



The earthquakes increased child labour that was already prevalent in the region. 90% of community members across the locations noticed increased risks of child labour, with 100% of respondents in Adiyaman, Kilis and Şanlıurfa reporting that the earthquakes have been a ‘push factor’ for child labour. Caregivers identified financial need (35%), family separation and family pressure (both 27%) as the main reasons for children’s engagement in labour after the disasters across all locations.



Mental health conditions are prevalent among UASC. 86% of caregivers identified various psychological signs, such as depression, trauma, and

seismophobia as the top concern for the children they look after. In Adiyaman and Şanlıurfa, all (100%) of caregivers said mental health concerns for the children they care for have increased since the earthquakes.



Support systems and basic services such as mental health and psychological services and health provided by local authorities and non-governmental organisations for UASC are among the least effective in meeting children’s needs. 100% of caregivers in Hatay said MHPSS and child protection services are “least effective” compared with 0-20% of respondents in other locations; 84% of all community members said that current child protection services are not meeting the needs of children.

Overview of recommendations

While our report’s detailed recommendations provided at the end of the report are contextualised to NWS and Southern Türkiye, they are framed around the following overall priorities:



Increasing and improving data collection and dissemination on UASC in their diversity and various forms of informal and formal alternative care, with a focus on community based alternative care systems.



Prioritising the prevention of family separation in emergencies and support family reunification.



Increasing support to parents, families, and caregivers including child-specific support (financial and in-kind) and mental health and emotional support for adults to enable them to provide appropriate care to children and prevent family separation and ensure UASC are cared for in a nurturing and stable environment.



Improving UASC’s access to equal, quality and targeted essential services, in particular mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), child protection and education.



Strengthening the capacity and skills of the child protection workforce in the core elements of UASC programming, including prevention of separation, case management, family tracing and reunification, and increasing cross-sectoral coordination to deliver holistic prevention and response strategies.



Increasing community actors and caregivers’ awareness and understanding of the specific risks and needs of unaccompanied and separated children in their area, including the barriers they face accessing support and services in accordance with their rights and best interests.



Ensuring the meaningful participation of unaccompanied and separated children, community members and caregivers in the planning and implementation of policies and programmes.



A father and son trying to salvage their belongings from their destroyed home in Syria after the earthquake. © World Vision Syria Response, External Consultant

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

A crisis within crises

26 million⁵ people have been impacted by the earthquakes that hit Northwest Syria and Southern Türkiye on the 6th of February 2023, and killed more than 56,000 people.⁶

The earthquakes erased entire towns and cities, and brought already vulnerable populations to their knees by worsening long-standing vulnerabilities and compounding the devastating effects of overlapping crises. As a result, the disasters' immediate impacts and socio-economic aftershocks have been particularly harmful for families that were already contending with multiple and intersecting challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, disease outbreaks, displacement, climate shocks and violence.

In Syria alone, the disasters affected nearly 9 million people, including 3.3 million children.⁷ The earthquakes severely impacted northwest Syria, primarily the governorates of Aleppo, Latakia, Tartous, Hama, and Idlib.⁸ This latest

tragedy happened in the context of 12 years of war and instability, continuous economic decline, ongoing disease outbreaks and multiple climate shocks, coming together to create an unfathomable humanitarian crisis affecting more than four million people in the region.⁹ Critical infrastructure including schools, hospitals, power and water systems, already severely under pressure, suffered significantly damaged or were destroyed. This further restricted families and children's access to vital services and basic necessities,¹⁰ which in turn, exacerbated their needs.¹¹ The earthquakes also uprooted over 100,000 people in the region, most of whom had already been displaced multiple times. It also worsened an already acute shelter crisis¹² for half of the 4.5 million Syrian living in precarious and unsafe conditions in displacement camps and informal sites.



9 in 10 people in Northwest Syria displaced by the earthquakes had already been displaced at least once by the conflict.¹³

The plight of families in NWS deteriorated again with an escalation of hostilities in Idleb and western Aleppo in October 2023, considered to be the worst since 2019. Increasing violence led to new waves of displacement and further affected critical facilities and infrastructure. Millions of people are now clinging on for survival. Meanwhile, they continue to be failed by humanitarian funding¹⁴ and forgotten by the international community.

In Türkiye, the earthquakes affected more than 15 million people – including 4.6 million children¹⁵ – across 10 of the poorest provinces,¹⁶ which also host the largest number of refugees.¹⁷ About 2.4 million people,¹⁸ 660,000 of them children, had to leave their homes and move to temporary shelters, primarily tents and metal shipping containers.¹⁹ The disasters also worsened the country's economic woes resulting from a devalued currency and skyrocketing inflation.²⁰ They compounded an already dire situation for the most vulnerable, especially the millions of refugees – mostly Syrian – whose livelihoods and incomes had been

severely affected by the pandemic. Refugees found themselves homeless and unable to access basic necessities or housing including as a result of their exclusion by discriminatory aid policies.²¹ The earthquakes also exposed and amplified existing tensions and discrimination, with refugees being scapegoated for the disasters.²² The devastating floods²³ that occurred just one month after the earthquakes worsened the secondary impacts of displacement and the lack of shelter,²⁴ further exposing people to various health and protection risks.²⁵



In the 10 Turkish provinces affected by the earthquakes, 1 in 10 of the local population was a Syrian refugee.



In February 2024, 1 in 3 children who lost their homes still lived in temporary housing.



A house destroyed by the Syria-Türkiye earthquake.
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Takaful Al Sham.

Children are disproportionately affected by crises and shocks but not all children are impacted equally

The February 2023 earthquakes have highlighted children's heightened and inherent vulnerability to natural disasters. This is especially true for the under-fives who are less able to withstand and survive shocks due to their physiological, behavioural, physical and underdevelopment.²⁶

In both NWS and Southern Türkiye, the earthquakes struck in the midst of a combination of crises that were already affecting children's health, well-being, and development. This latest tragedy compounded the hardships faced by children and further eroded the protective and thriving factors of an already vulnerable child's ecosystem.²⁷ Over 1.7 million children, a large majority of them forcibly displaced, already lived in poverty in the devastated and conflict-affected region of Northwest Syria.²⁸



In Syria, every child under the age of 12 has known nothing but conflict, violence and/or displacement.²⁹

In Türkiye, prior to the 6th of February 2023, one in three children lived in poverty,³⁰ with the country's near financial collapse and the lingering secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic worsening the socio-economic realities for children. Following the earthquakes, the living conditions of refugees and other displaced children deteriorated,³¹ which caused significant levels of deprivation.³²



1.7 million of the 4 million refugees and asylum-seekers currently registered in Türkiye are children.³³

While all children in NWS and Southern Türkiye living in the earthquake zones were affected, they were not all impacted equally. The disasters acted as a threat multiplier for violence against children who were already vulnerable as a result of intersecting factors - including gender, displacement, refugee status, disability, age and family status. This amplified the risks they faced during, and in the aftermath of, the earthquakes.

Against this background, this report explores how the aftershocks of the earthquakes have intensified existing protection risks for children in NWS and Southern Türkiye, while also prompting new ones. While it considers the profound effects of the earthquake aftermath on child protection across the disaster-affected areas, the report purposefully spotlights the situation of unaccompanied and separated children, and the intersecting factors that can lead them to be disproportionately vulnerable to multiple forms of violence. It emphasises the severe gaps and challenges in meeting the specific needs of Syrian unaccompanied and separated children in NWS and Southern Türkiye and explores the critical role of community-based care systems in supporting and caring for them.

About the research

This report's content primarily draws on data and findings from primary data collection conducted in February 2024 in earthquake-affected areas in NWS and Southern Türkiye.

The study builds on World Vision Syria Response's extensive portfolio of research, policy and advocacy on child protection in the region. It seeks to fill a critical evidence gap on the protection aftershocks of the earthquakes by exploring the specific risks and needs of unaccompanied and separated children in Northwest Syria and Syrian refugee children without parental care in Southern Türkiye. It also adopts an intersectional approach that brings to light the diverse needs and lived realities of different groups of UASC that are understudied.

The scope of the research referenced in this report explores the specific vulnerabilities and protection risks of Syrian unaccompanied and separated boys and girls in earthquake-affected

areas, and considers existing services and gaps in meeting their needs. The research also examines current community-based mechanisms used to provide care and protection for those children, and the impact of the earthquakes on social support systems.

The study collects data from two highly affected governorates in Northwest Syria (Aleppo and Idleb) and five provinces (Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis, Adiyaman, and Şanlıurfa) in Southern Türkiye. The research methodology combines surveys with carers and community members, along with 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) involving girls and boys aged 8-17. FGDs are divided into unaccompanied and separated children, and children in family care. In Southern Türkiye, all children and adults included in the research are Syrian refugees. The primary research is complemented by an extensive evidence review, enhancing the understanding of the explored issues.

More information about the study's sampling and locations can be found in Annex 1 of the report.

Key Definitions

Unaccompanied children have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. They may also be on their own or caring for their siblings as a child head of households.³⁴

Separated children are separated from both parents or from their legal or customary main caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.³⁵

Orphans are children with no living parents. In some cultures, "orphans" may be used to refer to children who have lost only one parent.³⁶

Some separated and unaccompanied children considered in our research in Southern Türkiye may also be refugees who have fled their home countries.



A Syrian girl in front of her tent in a displacement camp.
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SECTION 2: CHILD PROTECTION UNDER FIRE IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

The earthquakes and increased hostilities in Northwest Syria happened amidst an existing acute child protection crisis

Whether they are human-made or caused by natural shocks, crises disproportionately affect children who pay the physical and mental price of calamities affecting countries and communities. Children are also some of the most vulnerable to crisis-induced violence, abuse and exploitation, with a child's gender, age, disability, legal and family status further heightening their protection risks.

The earthquakes, which were followed by the escalation of hostilities in Idlib and western Aleppo in October 2023, have had catastrophic impacts on children who were already exposed to alarming protection risks. More than a decade of conflict (leading to multiple displacements in many cases), coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, a

worsening economic situation, and several weather shocks and disease outbreaks, had already severely exacerbated children's exposure to violence. They did so by undermining the capacity of parents and carers to provide for and protect their children and increased family separation.³⁷

Prior to the earthquakes, a wide range of harmful coping strategies such as child labour, child marriage, and different forms of exploitation and violence were commonly used against children, including children with disabilities who face greater protection risks.³⁸ A 2022 Protection Cluster survey found that an estimated 96% of children lived in communities where child labour was reported, while 84% lived in places where girls (15-17 years) were exposed to child marriage.³⁹ Limited or lack of access to education also worsened protection risks for children,⁴⁰ including armed group recruitment.⁴¹ Around 800,000 children were out of school in 2022,⁴² a number that had grown by nearly 40% since 2019.⁴³



In 2022, 57% of internally displaced people (IDP) camps in NWS had no access to primary schools and 80% to secondary schools.⁴⁴

Family separation was already growing in Northwest Syria before the earthquakes

One of the most immediate impacts of the 2023 earthquakes in NWS was a rise in family separations. Key drivers of separation were parents or caregivers being killed; families becoming homeless; high population movements and displacements; and socio-economic hardships that forced parents to separate from their children.⁴⁵ In addition to children separated by the earthquakes or previously unaccompanied in earthquakes-affected areas, some of the displaced Syrian refugee children whose caregivers in Southern Türkiye were killed in the disasters also returned to Syria to find relatives. There is however no information or data on those children.



A brother taking care of his sister in a displacement camp. © World Vision Syria Response Partner, Nasaem Khair.

What puts unaccompanied and separated children at a disproportionate risk during emergencies?

Displacement, loss of shelter or housing, disrupted or lost livelihoods, reduced or lack of access to essential services are some of the key drivers of family separation which can happen accidentally as a both a direct and indirect result of natural disasters and acute conflict.⁴⁶ It can also happen knowingly (but often reluctantly) when children are abandoned or given over to an adult or potentially a care institution due to financial hardship or other socio-economic reasons and a resort to negative coping strategies by parents and caregivers.

Because they have lost the protective and supportive environment that families and carers provide, UASC are some of the most vulnerable children in emergencies as they often have to face survival on their own. They face immense hardships and deprivations that severely compromise their well-being and development. In particular, they are disproportionately exposed to harm, violence, and exploitation, especially in times of crisis.⁴⁷ Intersecting factors of vulnerabilities including age, gender, and legal status⁴⁸ also exacerbate protection risks for UASC.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, World Vision⁴⁹ raised concerns about the rising numbers of children having lost one or both parents. Yet, family reunification was made difficult due to the lack of data collection systems on UASC and the loss or lack of civil documentation.⁵⁰ It is estimated that at least 537 children lost at least one parent in the disasters,⁵¹ and as at 11 April 2023, there were at least 800 unaccompanied and separated children in Northwest Syria.⁵² However, these figures are most likely to be greatly underestimated in light of assessments conducted in the months after the earthquakes and the resurgence of the conflict.

In June 2023,⁵³ an assessment found that there were children without parents or family members looking after them in 34% of the overall surveyed communities. This percentage increased to a staggering 82% in some communities, including Jandairis in Afrin (Aleppo Governorate), one of the most severely earthquake-affected areas. 65% of

the respondents from that same community also reported child-headed households.⁵⁴ A July 2023 assessment⁵⁵ further found that family separation ranked second (40%) in the top three protection risks, and death of a carer was identified as the main reason for family separation.⁵⁶ Other assessments also indicate that the number of UASC and child-headed households rose after the earthquakes.⁵⁷

67% of community members reported knowing many UASC in their community who have lost parents in the earthquake.

Child separation from caregivers caused by the earthquakes intensified the existing crisis of family separation with the number of UASC in the region on the rise, especially among adolescent boys.⁵⁸

More than a decade of conflict and displacement has severely affected family composition and led to losses or separations of parents or carers, a breakdown of care structures, and an increase in child-headed families. In addition, Syria's "inter-generational" documentation crisis⁵⁹ and gender discriminatory legislation that prevents Syrian women from passing on citizenship to their children,⁶⁰ continue to deprive children of their rights to nationality and legal identity.⁶¹ They also increase children's risks of becoming legally stateless,⁶² which has significant repercussions on their exposure to violence, especially as not having a nationality and legal identity severely limits their access to essential services⁶³ and to humanitarian aid in times of emergencies. Finally, cultural factors contribute to family separation.⁶⁴ For example, the divorce or re-marriage of a caregiver or parent – especially a mother – may lead to children being abandoned.⁶⁵



In 2022, only 13% of households in Northern Syria had the required official documentation.⁶⁶

The lack of system to collect data on unaccompanied and separated children,⁶⁷ unavailable or lost civil documentation, and the absence of a database for displaced people⁶⁸ severely hindered efforts to reunite children with their families after the disasters.⁶⁹

SPOTLIGHT: UN Guidelines and Resolution on Children Without Parental Care or at Risk of Losing it.

There are several key international instruments and pieces of guidance that pertain to the situation of unaccompanied and separated children, including the 2009 Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.⁷⁰ The Guidelines support the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Child and other child rights standards that pertain to children who are without, or at risk of losing parental care. They aim to inform policy and practice on the protection and well-being of those children. They set out a specific objective for the gradual elimination of institutional care for children within the wider context of developing systems for the protection and care of children, stating that alternative care for children should be provided in family-based settings. In several articles (140-152), they also provide for the protection and care of two specific groups of vulnerable children: children in emergencies and children outside their country of habitual residence, including UASC.

The Guidelines state that “UASC should enjoy the same right to protection and care as national children; their diversity must be taken into account; those who have arrived illegally should not be detained; and all reasonable efforts should be made to trace his/her family and to secure necessary documentation and information to enable the assessment of the children’s risk and social and family situation in their country of origin”.

The importance of providing adequate care and protection to children without parental care or at risk of losing it gained significant impetus through the adoption of a UN General Assembly resolution⁷¹ in December 2019. In this resolution, Member States commit to focusing on family and community-based care, and – of significant importance for UASC – to *improving data collection and tackling the drivers of unnecessary family separation*. The resolution recognises the specific vulnerabilities of unaccompanied migrant children and calls for “special protection and assistance and that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in their policies of integration, return and family reunification”.



Siblings helping each other wash their hands.
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Hand in Hand for Aid.

Kinship carers play a key role in looking after unaccompanied and separated children, but the impacts of the conflict and earthquakes are eroding community-based support

Kinship-care arrangements in the community are the main form of alternative care for UASC in NWS. In 2021, almost 60% of unaccompanied and separated children are cared for by extended family, typically grandparents, aunts and uncles, or friends.⁷² As many as 34% were living without adult care or supervision, some with their siblings (18%), with other children (10%), or alone (5%).⁷³

Our research found that half (50%) of all caregivers surveyed have experience caring for separated children regularly while 24% have experience looking after unaccompanied children regularly. A majority of children being care for are orphaned children (especially in Aleppo (68%) compared with 24% in Idlib) and orphaned children under the care of their grandparents (32% in Idlib versus 20% in Aleppo).

However, in relation to caring for unaccompanied children, the situation is different between locations. While 84% of caregivers in Aleppo care for unaccompanied children regularly (48%) or in a limited capacity (36%), in Idlib, over two-thirds (68%) of caregivers do not have experience caring for these children.

The number of UASC cared for by caregivers surveyed are however small (3 in Aleppo and 2 in Idlib), while community members reported knowing 28 and 10 UASC in Aleppo and Idlib respectively. The results may be explained by caregivers facing multiple challenges including displacement, loss of livelihoods/jobs, deteriorating mental health as a result of the earthquakes and insecurity, all of which were mentioned across both governorates. In Idlib however, 24% of respondents also reported that financial hardship is impacting caregiving practices. The earthquakes have also had a disastrous effect on social support systems as a result of people being uprooted and displaced once again, and families separated.

There is no state assistance for kinship carers and the humanitarian response is failing to provide

adequate support to caregivers, such as in-kind support (e.g. clothing, hygiene items) or cash transfers to support UASC's access to basic services.⁷⁴ **While 64% of respondents across both governorates reported getting some form of support, there was a significant difference between Aleppo where 72% of respondents receive some type of child support, compared with 56% in Idleb. In addition, financial support is extremely limited (12% in Aleppo and 4% in Idleb), with education assistance the main type of help received (28% in Aleppo and 16% in Idleb).**

Lack of adequate and holistic support to caregivers puts additional strain on them, amidst overlapping crises, including the earthquakes which have severely disrupted social dynamics and community-based care. This has led to an increase in (unregulated) residential care,⁷⁵ unsupervised living, and child-headed households. Child-headed households who often face stigma, discrimination and social exclusion,⁷⁶ cannot benefit from cash transfer programmes which exclude children under 18 as direct recipients, and only have limited access to humanitarian assistance (e.g. shelter, food) as they are not systematically included.

As a result, a growing number of children and adolescents are left without any support and are at the mercy of people who prey on acute emotional, psychological and socio-economic vulnerability.

As kinship-care arrangements disintegrated due to the war and multiple shocks, institutional or residential (e.g. orphanages) care emerged over the past few years. However very little is known about the availability and supply of institutions, the number of children present, and their quality of care. In fact, it is incredibly challenging to trace and therefore support children once they have left institutional care, due to the absence of reporting or oversight systems.⁷⁷

More generally, all types of alternative care – formal or informal – lack critical systematic checks, registration, regular monitoring and safeguarding systems (there is no monitoring system for kinship care), exposing children to a wide range of protection risk, including physical and emotional violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.⁷⁸ Unaccompanied and separated

children in Northwest Syria are invisible: they are not recorded, accounted for, and their situation is largely unknown.

Main types of alternative care arrangements

There are two main forms of alternative care. Family-based care and residential care. The primary types of family-based care are kinship care and foster care. Kinship care is the main form of alternative care commonly used for separated and unaccompanied children.⁷⁹ Kinship carers are extended family or close friends of the family known to the child which has been ordered by a competent authority. In practice however, most children in kinship care in the contexts considered in the report have not been legally registered. Supervised independent living, where an adolescent or group of adolescents live independently is another type of alternative care that is also relevant in the context of this report. Under this care arrangement, children must be monitored. Residential care is provided in non-family-based group settings such as orphanages, where children live and receive care and are placed by order of a competent authority. Residential care facilities can be operated by a government agency or by a private entity, including civil social organisations.



A survey on alternative care in the region found that 91% of child protection actors who responded felt that unaccompanied and separated boys had no support or that it was inadequate. The same was felt to be true regarding unaccompanied and separated girls, indicated by 84% of respondents⁸⁰

The earthquakes, increased violence and insecurity have worsened UASC's vulnerabilities and protection risks



89% of over 2 million children in NWS are in need of child protection assistance.⁸¹

The devastating damages caused by the earthquakes and escalations of hostilities have significantly heightened UASC's vulnerabilities and worsened existing protection concerns for children.

Caregivers across all locations reported that the earthquakes amplified UASC's existing vulnerabilities and created new challenges, with girls perceived to be disproportionately affected by the disasters due to their status in society and gender norms,⁸² according to 84% of community members across both governorates. A higher prevalence of respondents in Idleb (44% and 40% for girls and boys respectively) said that UASC were more vulnerable as a result of the earthquakes than



A house destroyed by the Syria-Türkiye earthquake.
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Takaful Al Sham.

in Aleppo (28% for boys and girls) with gender and girls' lower status in society being given as the main reasons for increased vulnerability.

Child marriage, child labour and poor mental health in particular emerged as increasing child protection concerns in the months after the earthquakes,⁸³ a trend confirmed by our research.

SPOTLIGHT: The impact of cultural norms and societal attitudes on the protection of UASC

This research explored an issue that has not been considered by previous studies - the effects of cultural norms and societal attitudes on the protection of UASC. It revealed significantly different perceptions between the two governorates.

A large majority of community members in Aleppo (73%) highlighted that cultural and societal norms have had either a highly negative or somewhat negative effect on the protection of UASC, compared with 0% of respondents in Idleb. The rejection of unaccompanied children (and their subsequent social isolation) was mentioned as the primary example of negative attitudes by 60% of respondents (especially in Aleppo 68% versus 16% in Idleb). **Similarly**, 44% of caregivers from Aleppo reported that cultural norms and societal attitudes had either a **highly negative or somewhat negative impact** on the protection of UASC, compared with 8% of caregivers in Idleb. Child marriage was mentioned as one of the negative consequences of harmful cultural norms.

In contrast, **a large majority (88%) of caregivers in Idleb reported the highly positive and somewhat positive influence** of cultural beliefs and social attitudes on the protection of UASC, a feeling shared by an equal 88% of community members. Cultural and religious values which encourage caring for orphans and the safety net provided by community support to orphaned children were identified as some of the main reasons for that positive influence.

Child marriage increased after the earthquakes

The earthquakes and intensification of conflict have further amplified girls’ protection needs⁸⁴ and the normalisation of GBV.

Child marriage - already on the rise in the region prior to the disasters⁸⁵ was identified as a key protection concern in affected communities in the months following the earthquakes, primarily due to safety concerns and financial stress.⁸⁶ An assessment published in October 2023 found that child marriage was identified by communities as a negative coping mechanism in 82% of the areas considered.⁸⁷ Other forms of violence against girls - such as domestic violence, harassment, and beatings perpetrated by relatives or other carers for separated girls have also been reported after the disasters.⁸⁸

While data on the impact of the earthquakes on child marriage is largely missing, our research respondents confirmed child marriage in NWS has increased since February 2023. 40% of caregivers **from across the two locations reported being aware of child marriage of unaccompanied and separated children in the aftermath of the earthquakes, with a slightly higher percentage telling us about the issue in Idleb (44%) than in Aleppo (36%).**

A higher proportion of community members (73%) also reported noticing an increase in child marriage among UASC, especially in Idleb (85%),

reflecting the higher risks of child marriage for unaccompanied and separated girls (but also some boys) in that governorate. The top drivers of child marriage after the earthquakes – as identified by community members - are deteriorating living conditions and the absence of a caregiver.

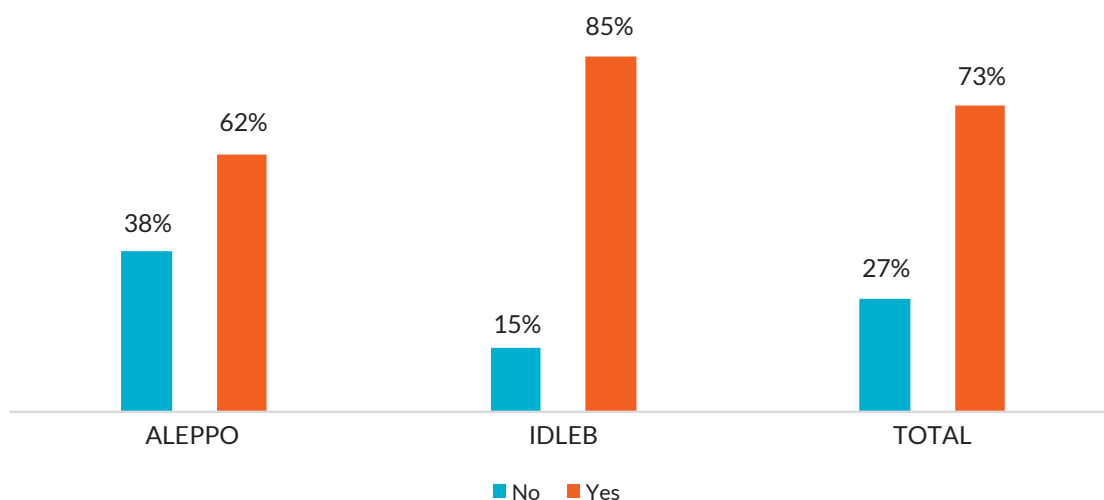
The children we spoke to also reported being aware of child marriages happening after the earthquakes. **Unaccompanied girls** mentioned other girls having to marry due to loss of family or as a means of financial security, while children with families highlighted the social and cultural norms and financial hardship as the main drivers of child marriage in their community, even before the earthquakes.

“A girl married after the earthquake due to an urgent need for care and financial support. Marriage was the only solution for her.” - Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Aleppo.

“I heard that one of the children, who is 16 years old, got married because he lost his parents and needs a wife to secure his food and clothes, from washing to eating and drinking.”- Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Idleb.

“Our neighbour was alone after his family died in the earthquake. His grandfather married him off as he was the only remaining family member. I feel sad for him; it’s not good to marry so young.” –Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Idleb.

% OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO NOTICED AN INCREASE IN CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG UASC POST-EARTHQUAKES



SPOTLIGHT: Unaccompanied and Separated Adolescents

When the earthquakes struck, protection actors underlined the distinctive vulnerability of unaccompanied and separated adolescents to the harmful impacts of the disasters due to many of them living alone and homeless.⁸⁹

While adolescent boys and girls face heightened risks of family separation, boys are more likely to be forcibly separated from their parents or carers.⁹⁰ This is because cultural norms dictate that older boys (although some as young as 10) may be separated from their families⁹¹ or pushed out of alternative care structures (e.g. residential or institutional facilities) and widow camps⁹² once they reach puberty. They are then left to survive without education or work, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation, child labour, forced recruitment, trafficking, and kidnapping.⁹³ In addition, if a widow remarries, it is very common for her new husband to force any adolescent boys to leave the home.⁹⁴

Unaccompanied and separated adolescent girls are more likely to experience GBV,⁹⁵ including child marriage, when living with extended family and friends. They are also at increased risk of sexual violence,⁹⁶ especially when living alone or with no adult support. In addition, they face sexual abuse and exploitation,⁹⁷ including when trying to access aid.⁹⁸

The earthquakes pushed more children to work and out of school

Due to their effects on people's already fragile livelihoods and the destruction of assets, the earthquakes have pushed more families to resort to child labour as a negative coping strategy to increase contributions to household income and care for other household members.⁹⁹ This was already widespread in the region, prior to the earthquakes.¹⁰⁰

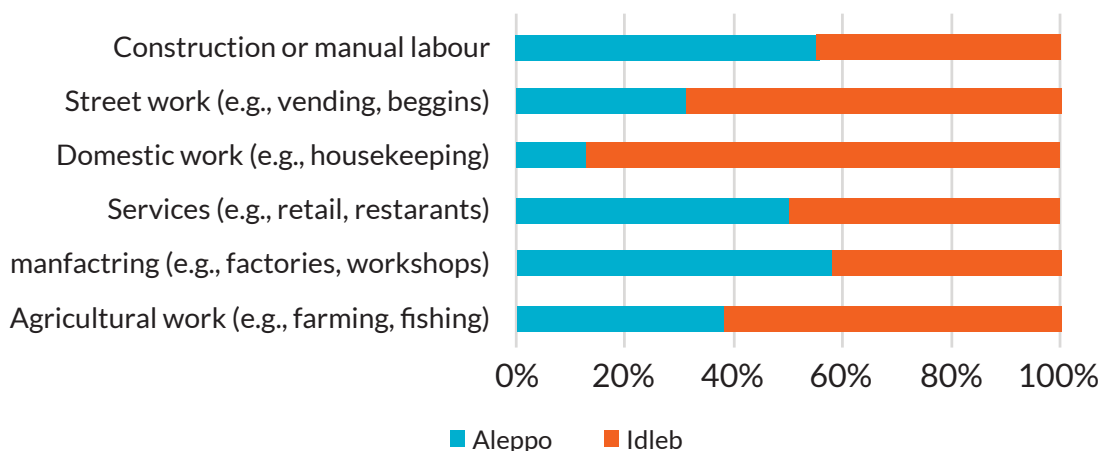
The earthquakes also increased the prevalence of child labour as families' financial hardship worsened, and access to education was significantly reduced.¹⁰¹ An assessment conducted in August 2023 found that child labour was identified by 99% of the communities as the most relevant child protection risk.¹⁰² Evidence available also suggests that more children have become involved in hazardous forms of labour, including clearing rubble.¹⁰³ The situation is even more dire for unaccompanied and separated children who are more exposed to labour exploitation, including by caregivers, and forced recruitment and trafficking.¹⁰⁴

Increased child labour was reported by a large majority (73%) of community members in Aleppo and Idlib, primarily due to worsening living conditions. The increased risk of exploitation was also highlighted by nearly 54% of community members, with no major difference between Aleppo and Idlib. Caregivers in both governorates said that economic need (49%) and family loss (26%)

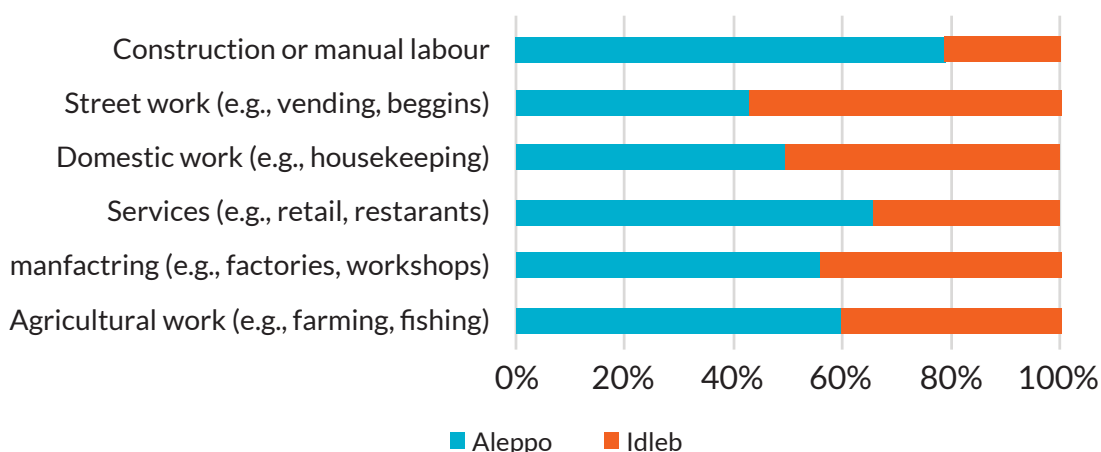


An abandoned and dilapidated classroom in Syria.
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Hand in Hand for Aid.

FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR MOST PREVALENT BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKES



FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR MOST PREVALENT AFTER THE EARTHQUAKES



were the primary reasons for children engaging in child labour after the earthquakes. Before and after the earthquakes, the most prevalent form of child labour was manual and construction work, which increased after the disasters and the damages and demolition of buildings.

Unaccompanied and separated children we spoke to also shared the impacts of family loss on their vulnerability to child labour, with financial need being cited as the main reason for working even before the earthquakes.

“There is a child in our neighbourhood, 14 years old, who lost his parents in a tragic accident and has to work as a street vendor to provide for his livelihood.” - Girls FGD, 8-12 years old, Idleb.

“My family abandoned me when I was young, so I had to work. It was a difficult experience, but I learned how to deal with hardships and build personal strength.” - Boys FGD, 8-12 years old, Aleppo.



SPOTLIGHT: The earthquakes amplified the education crisis in NWS

Idleb (69%) and Aleppo (38%) are some of the governorates that have the highest percentages of out of school children.¹⁰⁵ This exposes them to increased protection risks, such as child labour and child marriage. The education infrastructure in NWS was already insufficient prior to the earthquakes, with over 1,000 schools damaged and a chronic shortage of qualified teachers.¹⁰⁶ Hostilities, including attacks on schools, multiple displacements and deepening poverty were some of the key drivers of the learning crisis prior to the earthquakes.

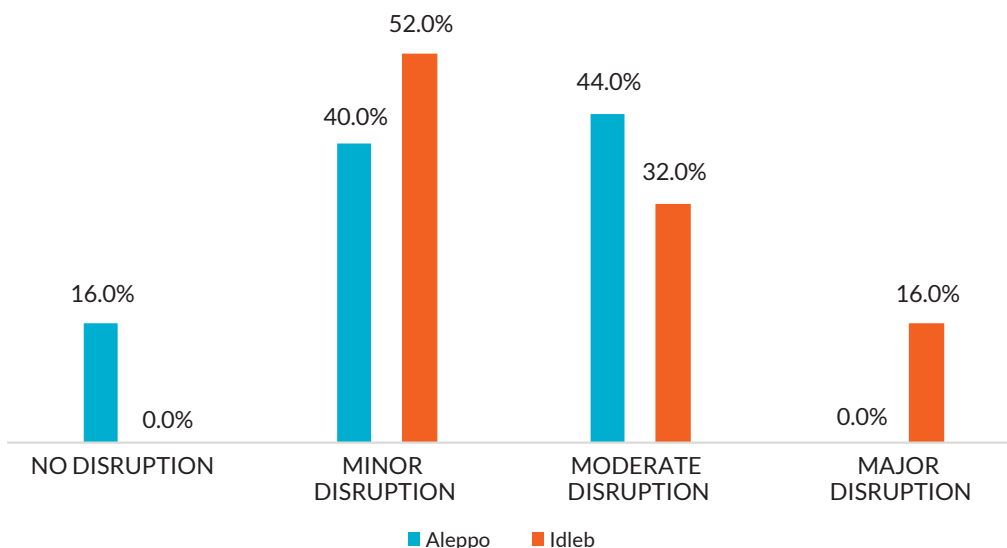
The earthquakes therefore shook an already fragile and under-stress education system by further damaging educational infrastructure. A staggering 1,000 primary and secondary schools in NWS were affected by the disasters, which caused a 25% surge in the number of out-of-school children.¹⁰⁷ There are now 1 million children with no access to education across the region.¹⁰⁸

Caregivers (44%) and community members (67%) from both governorates reported that the earthquakes disrupted children’s education “moderately”. While more caregivers in Aleppo (44%) highlighted stronger disruptions than in Idleb (31%), more community members in Idleb (81%) reported the same trend than in Aleppo (54%), reflecting varied perceptions on the impact of the disasters on children’s learning.

According to 61% of community members in Idleb, the educational needs of children were “moderately” being met, while 46% of respondents in Aleppo (compared with only 19% in Idleb) thought that children’s learning needs were addressed “well”.

A majority of caregivers in both Aleppo (56%) and Idleb (68%) reported that educational services were “moderately effective” to meet the needs of children.

EXTENT OF DISRUPTION ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION



The existing and severe mental health needs of children worsened after the disasters

“I am afraid of the sounds of airplanes and sleeping alone in a dark room, but after the earthquake, I am afraid of high buildings and any sudden shaking, which causes me intense fear.”- Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Idlib.

The profound emotional and psychological consequences of the earthquakes have affected children who were already experiencing extremely severe mental health issues due to relentless exposure to death, violence, shocks and crises. Prior to the earthquakes, more than 75% of Syrian children in NWS displayed symptoms of severe stress and anxiety, and were in need of critical mental health and psychosocial support.¹⁰⁹ Shocking and heart-breaking reports¹¹⁰ of “broken children”, some attempting to commit or dying by suicide in the region, unveiled the deep extent of desperation and hopelessness that children and young people experience.

In 2020, almost one in five of all recorded suicide attempts and deaths in Northwest Syria were children.¹¹¹

The mental health toll of the conflict, displacement and multiple shocks, including the earthquakes, has also affected parents and carers’ ability to look

after and protect their children, and has increased violence and neglect.¹¹²

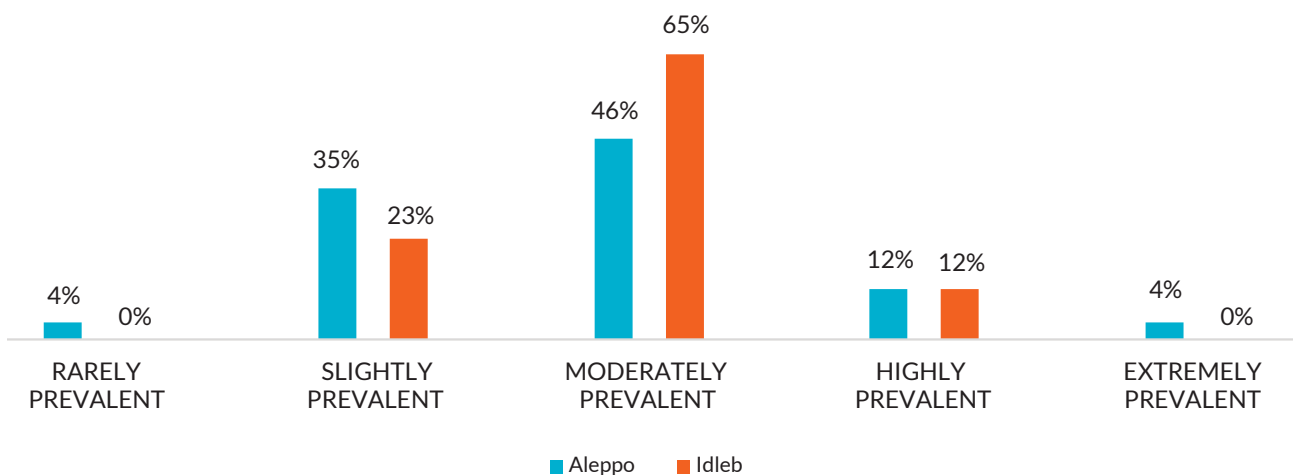
More than half (56%) of community members responding across the two governorates reported that mental health symptoms or issues were “moderately prevalent” among UASC after the earthquakes, with a higher proportion of the respondents in Idlib (65%) compared with Aleppo (46%) observing this trend.

Caregivers presented an alarming picture of the trauma and mental health consequences of the earthquakes of the children they care for, including as a result of the loss of loved ones and the emotional and physical intensity of the disasters.

- **74% of respondents in both governorates identified persistent signs of psychosocial distress, sadness, loss of interest in activities, low energy, intense worries or anxiety related to the earthquakes as the top concerns for children since the disasters.**
- **A higher number of respondents (84%) in Idlib** than in Aleppo (64%) were concerned about the mental health of children.

Children themselves told us of the severe psychological and emotional effects of the conflict, and how their well-being has been severely impaired since the earthquakes. Negative feelings about the loss of loved ones, instability, and insecurity are disrupting children’s everyday life. This reflects the urgent need for mental health and psychological support to address their trauma and help them recover.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH SIGNS OR ISSUES AMONG UASC POST-EARTHQUAKES



“I am terrified to leave the house, so getting help or feeling safe is hard. - When there is fighting in the streets or bombings, it’s difficult.” - Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Aleppo.

“The fighting and problems in the area make me feel insecure. I’m afraid of loss and displacement. I lost my mother and father, and only my brother, who takes care of me, remains.” - Girls FGD, 8-12 years old, Idleb.

“When fighting happens, I feel lonely and scared at the same time. There is no one I can turn to for help, which makes me feel weak and isolated.” - Boys FGD, 8-12 years old, Aleppo.

“Before the earthquakes, I was worried about power outages, lack of food, continuous movement, and displacement due to war and conflicts. After the earthquake, I became more afraid that buildings would collapse, we would remain under the rubble, and I would lose my grandparents, who care for me.”—Girls FGD, 8-12 years old, Idleb.

SPOTLIGHT: Children with disabilities – A blind spot for humanitarian action in NWS

The number and situation of UASC in Northwest Syria with disabilities is unknown. However, evidence shows that children with disabilities are more likely to be exposed to violence than their non-disabled peers¹¹³ and are disproportionately impacted by crises.¹¹⁴ With people reying on vulnerabilities, unaccompanied and separated children with disabilities are most likely to experience significant protection risks. Although limited, existing data shows that girls with disabilities living with a carer are more likely to be married off early due to stigma and discrimination and the perceived burden of caring for them.¹¹⁵

Our research found that 60% of caregivers across both governorates in NWS believe UASC with mental disabilities have the highest level of needs, followed by children whose disability is physical (16%), sensory (12%) and cognitive (9%).

Children we spoke to the heightened needs of their peers with disabilities, and the many challenges they face.

“My cousin suffers from difficulties in speaking and walking due to the war. She struggles to play with us, and some people bully her because of her condition. She feels lonely and sad as a result of social interaction difficulties and her disability.” - Girls FGD, 8-12 years old, Idleb.

“I think people with disabilities might face some challenges. It might be difficult for my disabled friend to play the games we all play, but we always find innovative ways to interact with each other.” - Boys FGD, 8-12 years old, Aleppo.

However, children with disabilities, let alone those without parental care, remain a “blind spot” of the humanitarian response in the region, with programmes often not being designed and implemented to take their specific needs into consideration or that exclude them.¹¹⁶ There is no evidence on the impact of the earthquakes on the needs of children with disabilities who were separated from their families or carers during the earthquakes or those who were separated or unaccompanied before the disasters.





The needs of unaccompanied and separated children are greater than the current level of assistance and support that is being provided

As explored in the previous section, the earthquakes (and renewed hostilities in the region) have compounded already staggering physical, mental and psychosocial support and protection needs. As of March 2024, 89% of over 2 million children in the region required child protection services.¹¹⁷ Yet, ongoing disruptions, over-stretched services, chronic lack of human resources and underfunding still significantly hinder their access to those lifesaving services. These figures do not account specifically for the needs of unaccompanied and separated children, who - as explored in the previous section - face significant protection risks including child marriage and child labour but remain largely unprotected.¹¹⁸

More than half (54%) of caregivers reported that, despite some support, the mental health and financial needs of unaccompanied and separated children are not being met. In Idleb, 44% of respondents reported the lack of adequate mental

health and psychosocial support and financial support (compared with 28% of respondents in Aleppo). A majority of respondents across both governorates (56% in Aleppo and 64% in Idleb) also reported the lack of effective MHPSS. A majority (54%) of community members across locations also believe that the main important strategy to support the needs of unaccompanied and separated children is the provision of basic services such as food, housing, and education.

Our research also highlighted the lack of suitable and effective child protection systems/mechanisms for unaccompanied and separated children:

- **48% of caregivers reported that the current child protection support and systems for UASC provided by local authorities or international/national non-governmental organisations (I/NNGOs) are only “slightly effective”** (i.e. they offer minimal assistance but are largely insufficient and lacking in key areas needed for effective support), while 42% find the systems only “moderately effective” (i.e. they are somewhat effective, meeting some needs of unaccompanied/separated children, but require significant improvements in some areas).

- **Child protection systems appear to be less effective in Idlib than in Aleppo. In Idlib, 68% of caregivers reported that child protection services are only “slightly effective”** compared to 36% in Aleppo. **12% of respondents in Idlib (compared to none in Aleppo) also said that child protection support is entirely inadequate** and provides little to no effective assistance for UASC.
- **A large majority of community members in both Idlib (69%) and Aleppo (65.4%) also find that child protection services do not address key protection risks for UASC** (such as child marriage and child labour). The current support systems provided by local authorities and non-governmental organisations are also considered weak and only “slightly” or “moderately” effective by 48% and 42% of community members respectively.

Community members also shared their views on strategies needed to address critical protection risks, including sexual exploitation, forced labour and recruitment, in particular more support to caregivers, the effective enforcement of laws, community awareness raising, improving children’s standards of living, and providing them with vocational programmes.



Throughout 2023, as a result of funding challenges, services were disrupted in 35 Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) and 17 WGSS closed down.¹¹⁹



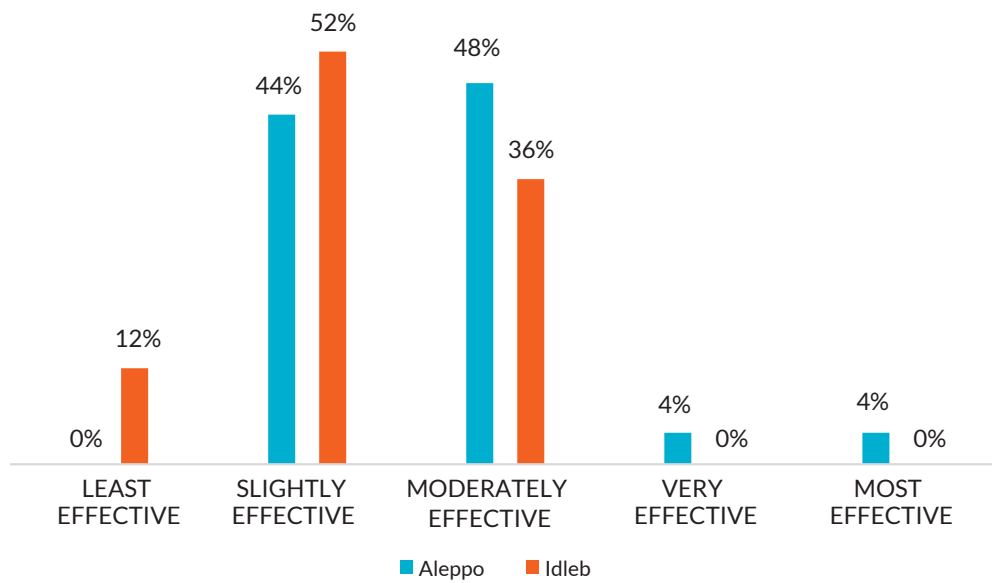
Children filling their water jug from a tank in a Syrian displacement camp.
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Action for Humanity.

These findings reflect critical gaps in the delivery of quality and adequate child protection services in NWS. Child protection systems in the country are fragmented. There are no common standards of practice and the gap in capacity and resources is compounded by mistrust between the local authorities and non-governmental actors.¹²⁰ In addition, while there have been attempts to “standardise” the delivery of specialised child protection services for UASC, the emphasis has been on supporting children after separation, with little priority given to preventing family separation.¹²¹ The lack of coordination between

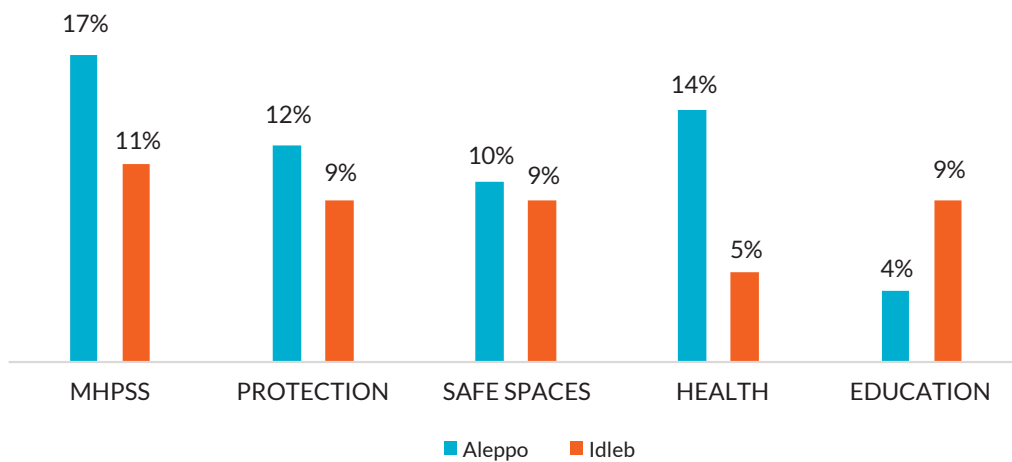
formal and community-based child protection actors also impedes a much needed focus on risks of separation and how to prevent it.¹²² This leaves communities facing multiple challenges and increasingly under pressure to care for a growing number of separated and unaccompanied children.

In addition, despite increased level of needs, children have been less able to access essential services after the earthquakes as highlighted by community members, with MHPSS and protection assistance ranking first (28%) and second (21%) respectively across both locations.

CAREGIVERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEVEL OF EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS PROVIDED BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES OR I/NGOS



SERVICES LESS ACCESSED BY UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN POST-EARTHQUAKES ACCORDING TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS





Children walking through a Syrian displacement camp.
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Hand in Hand for Aid.

SECTION 3: UNEARTHING THE GROWING CHILD PROTECTION CRISIS IN SOUTHERN TÜRKIYE

The earthquakes have exposed Türkiye's invisible crisis of unaccompanied and separated children

As in NWS, the earthquakes in Türkiye triggered family separations, and by doing so, created entirely new protection concerns. It is estimated that at least 3,500 children in Southern Türkiye lost either one or both parents as a result of the earthquakes.¹²³ 1,890 children who were separated from their families were subsequently registered by the government and while a large majority (1,405) were then reunited, 106 remained unidentified weeks after disasters struck.¹²⁴

In February 2024, hundreds of children rescued from the rubble and checked into hospitals were

also reported to have disappeared.¹²⁵ In addition, data is missing on UASC who may have arrived in Southern Türkiye from earthquake-affected regions in NWS and children who became unaccompanied as a direct result of the disasters.



80% of community members surveyed by World Vision reported knowing of many unaccompanied and separated children in their community who lost parents in the earthquakes.

The lack of adequate data on unaccompanied and separated children in the aftermath of the earthquakes reflects the chronic invisibility of

those children in government policy and in the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in Türkiye. Prior to the earthquakes, the number of UASC - most coming to Türkiye from countries affected by war in particular Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan¹²⁶ was increasing.¹²⁷ However, data on those children remains sparse due to lack of civil documentation and children not wanting to be identified to enable them to continue their journey out of the country, or out of fear related to their irregular status.¹²⁸ The termination of refugee registration being handled by UNHCR on 10th September 2018¹²⁹ also means that there is now even less information on the number of UASC: *“The [Ministry of Family and Social Services] does not accept an unaccompanied child. Do you know how many unaccompanied children are Syrians? Nobody knows. There’s no such thing. Once the number was declared as 50,000 Syrians as the unaccompanied minors. It was an advantage for us to be able to identify them (as referring to the system before 10 September 2018). Now, this opportunity is completely lost.”*¹³⁰

There is no specific law on unaccompanied and separated migrant and refugee children in Türkiye. However, Article 48 of the Temporary Protection Regulation (2014) provides that unaccompanied children shall be treated in accordance with relevant child protection legislation and in consideration of the “best interests” principle. The 2015 Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policies (MFSP) Directive on Unaccompanied Children provides additional guidance regarding the rights, protection procedures and implementation of services for unaccompanied children. Unaccompanied and separated children are considered “children in need of protection” under Turkish law.¹³¹ The Directorate General of Migration Management¹³² is responsible for the identification of unaccompanied children who are then placed under the responsibility of the MFSP, which must provide essential services¹³³ including housing and appointing a guardian.¹³⁴ The Ministry is responsible for the referral of unaccompanied children to child house facilities for the under 13s and child centres or “other appropriate places” for children aged 13-18.¹³⁵ Türkiye also has “Minimum Standards for Children Deprived of Parental Care”¹³⁶ adapted from Save the Children’s “International Standards on Childcare”.

Despite a comprehensive legal framework on unaccompanied and separated children, in practice, the law is not effectively implemented, and there are some significant issues around their identification.¹³⁷ As a result, unaccompanied and separated children face significant protection risks. Many are not provided with a guardian, nor are they taken into state care¹³⁸ or able to access essential services, such as healthcare and education. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, 1,464 children¹³⁹ were officially identified as unaccompanied by the government. However, allegations of rescued and separated children not being identified by official institutions and recorded, and who subsequently disappeared, also emerged.¹⁴⁰ “Missing children” has been an ongoing issue in the country where thousands of children “vanish” after entering the country. In 2017, 1,660 children were “officially missing”.¹⁴¹ This number will undoubtedly have increased since the 2023 earthquakes.

Unaccompanied migrant and asylum seeker boys – some under 18 from Afghanistan and Syria - are also treated as potential “national threats” and are falsely registered as being 18 or older by the Turkish authorities. This leads to their arbitrary detention on grounds of nationality, them being kept in centres with unrelated adults,¹⁴² or being forcibly and unlawfully deported to Syria.¹⁴³ There is virtually no information on the number and situation of unaccompanied or separated girls.

Türkiye also has a foster care system that saw a surge in applications following the earthquakes, reaching 283,000 only two weeks after the disasters.¹⁴⁴ It is, however, not known whether those applications were primarily for Turkish children or included refugee children. The situation of children in foster families is not adequately monitored, families receive little financial support, and reports of discrimination against non-Turkish foster children have emerged, including in relation to their access to healthcare and education.¹⁴⁵ The foster care system also faces numerous challenges and many children end up in institutional care facilities that have been criticised due to inadequate conditions, limited staff capacity, inadequate educational support or recreational activities in residential facilities and orphanages.¹⁴⁶



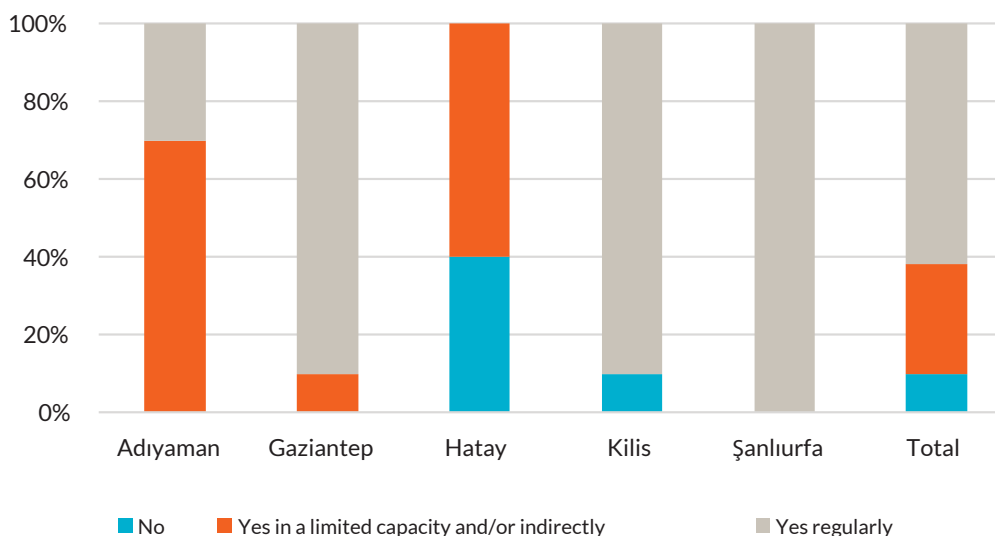
Kinship care is used for unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children

There is no data on unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children in Southern Türkiye – which our research focused on – and even less information about kinship care arrangements for those children. While some children, in particular older boys, may travel unaccompanied, close family ties and the importance of kin relationships means that Syrian refugee children who have lost or are separated from their parents due to the conflict may travel to Türkiye with their extended family. Data on separated and unaccompanied Syrian refugee children is however impossible to find due to the predominance of informal or kinship care arrangements within communities, with relatives or carers not registering changes in care arrangements.

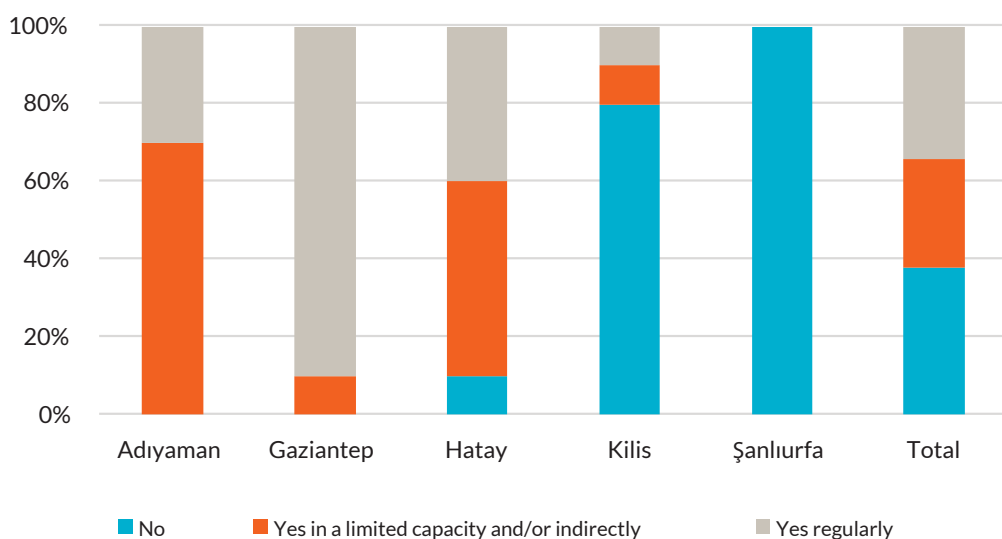
54% of surveyed caregivers said they look after children regularly – with women having more experience caring for children. There are, however, significant differences between locations and between unaccompanied and separated children:

- **62% of caregivers across all locations reported looking after separated children regularly. However, the prevalence greatly varies between cities: 100% of caregivers in Şanlıurfa and 90% in Kilis and Gaziantep look after separated children regularly compared with 0% in Hatay and 30% in Adiyaman** where caregivers look after them in a limited capacity (60% and 70% respectively).
- **Only 34% of caregivers across all locations reported looking after unaccompanied children regularly.** While 90% of respondents in Gaziantep care for unaccompanied children regularly, less than half of respondents in other locations – including 0% in Şanlıurfa - do so.

CAREGIVERS' EXPERIENCE CARING FOR SEPARATED CHILDREN



CAREGIVERS' EXPERIENCE CARING FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN



A majority of unaccompanied and separated children being cared for are orphaned children, orphaned children under the care of relatives, and children whose fathers died. Although caregivers across all locations look after 13 unaccompanied or separated children, community members reported that at least 60, with the highest numbers of children found in Gaziantep (27) and Hatay (19).

Community members also provide some form of care to unaccompanied and separated children. There is little difference between separated and unaccompanied children in terms of overall findings, but the data show variations across some locations.

- **63% and 57% of community members across locations care for separated and unaccompanied children respectively in a limited capacity and/or indirectly.**
- **An overwhelming majority of community members in Hatay (90%) and Kilis (100%) provide care to separated children in a limited capacity and/or indirectly.** This is compared with 60% and 64% in Gaziantep and Adiyaman and no community members in Şanlıurfa where 100% of respondents reported caring for separated children regularly.
- **A large majority of respondents in Adiyaman (82%) and Hatay (80%) provide care for**

unaccompanied children in a limited capacity and/or indirectly compared with 0% in Şanlıurfa. In contrast, 80% of community members in Şanlıurfa care for unaccompanied children regularly.

- **40% of community members in Kilis and 20% in Şanlıurfa** do not provide any care for unaccompanied children.

The importance of community support (and in some cases institutional care) for children without families and affected by the earthquakes was emphasised by children we spoke to.

“I struggled with school enrolment. Nearby schools refused me, and I was enrolled in one an hour and a half away. I left school to work, not wanting to burden my aunt. At work, I met someone who introduced me to an orphanage that cared for my needs, allowing me to stop working and focus on my education.” – Boy, FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“I used to cry at school when I saw my friends come with their families while I was alone. My friend’s mother started taking me with her son daily so that I wouldn’t be alone”. – Boys FGD, 8-12 years old, Hatay.

Kinship care is both the most widely used arrangement by Syrian refugees and the most valued option for children who cannot be cared for by their parents. Yet it has been neglected by governmental and humanitarian agencies. **44% of caregivers across locations do not receive any assistance for the children they look after, with those in Hatay and Adiyaman receiving the least support.** MHPSS and awareness sessions (22%) and financial support (20%) are the main forms of support provided to caregivers, although it is only in Şanlıurfa that financial support is provided to a large majority (70%) of caregivers (compared to 10-20% in other locations).

44% of caregivers surveyed in Türkiye said that their ability to look after children has also been impaired by the impact of the earthquakes on their emotional and psychological well-being (e.g. increased anxiety and fear). Financial hardship and the economic impact of the earthquakes were also identified by 24% as affecting their caregiving responsibilities. **In Adiyaman, a staggering 90% of caregivers reported being mentally affected by the disasters, while 60% of respondents in Şanlıurfa struggle to cope with increased financial challenges.**



A father helping his child feel warm during a snow storm in a Syrian displacement camp. © World Vision Syria Response Partner, Hand in Hand for Aid.

“After losing my family in the earthquakes, we stayed with my married aunt. Her husband evicted us all, including his wife. Friends heard about our situation and gathered funds for us, and we rented a house, covering the expenses for a good period.” - Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.



A mother and her daughter purchasing groceries at a supermarket in Türkiye. © World Vision Syria Response.

The earthquakes have exacerbated unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children’s vulnerabilities and protection risks

The earthquakes struck the most deprived areas of Türkiye that hosted Syrian refugee children due to the affected zones being so close to the Syrian border. The hardest hit communities already had higher child poverty rates than the country average and hosted a large refugee population who are

much poorer compared to the average household in the country. Around 40% households in the affected areas lived below the poverty line, compared to around 32% nationwide.¹⁴⁷ As a result, those areas suffered 3.5 times more damage than the rest of the country’s affected zones.¹⁴⁸



Around half of Türkiye 3.7 million refugee and migrant population were affected by the earthquakes, 149 a majority of whom are Syrians under temporary protection status.

The earthquakes impacted existing UASC and increased the number of unaccompanied and separated children. For Syrian refugee children, the disasters have worsened existing vulnerabilities and shaken the existing support and care they may have been provided by caregivers and the broader community, with both girls and boys being severely affected:

- **44% and 56% of caregivers surveyed** think that the earthquakes impacted unaccompanied or separated girls and boys “moderately”. However, across all locations, respondents reported that more girls had been impacted “significantly” (40% compared to 28% for boys).
- **Girls are also believed to be more disproportionately affected by the disasters than boys by 90% of community members** across all locations. The impact on girls’ vulnerabilities was greater in Gaziantep, Hatay, and Sanliurfa.



People standing on the rubble of their home immediately after the Syria earthquake struck. © World Vision Syria Response, External Consultant.

- **The heightened vulnerability of girls compared to boys was also reported by over 90% of community members** across all locations, reaching 100% in Adiyaman, Gaziantep, and Kilis.

The earthquakes exacerbated families' financial hardship and compounded multiple protection risks for children. In August 2023 UNHCR¹⁵⁰ reported increasing protection concerns among both host communities and refugee households due to their deteriorating socio-economic conditions and the use negative coping strategies. Turkish children were more likely to experience conflict amongst household members, while Syrian children were more exposed to various forms of violence including child marriage and child labour.¹⁵¹

SPOTLIGHT: The impact of cultural norms and societal attitudes on the protection of UASC

Similar to Northwest Syria, our research considered the effects of cultural norms and societal attitudes on the protection of unaccompanied and separated children. It revealed very different perceptions between the two governorates.

The “somewhat” and “highly” negative impact of cultural norms and societal attitudes on the protection of UASC was highlighted by 39% of community members across locations, with a higher prevalence of respondents reporting on this trend in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, and Kilis. Negative societal attitudes, such as the rejection of unaccompanied children (67%) were identified as the main reason the harmful consequences of culture and societal attitudes.

44% of caregivers across locations also reported that cultural norms and society attitudes had a **highly negative or somewhat negative impact** on the protection of UASC, with a higher percentage of respondents in Kilis (80%) reported this trend. The positive influence of cultural beliefs and social attitudes on the protection of UASC was highlighted by 60% of caregivers in Hatay. Cultural and religious values which encourage caring for orphans and the safety net provided by community support to orphaned children were identified as the main reason for the positive impact.

Cases of child marriage went up after the earthquakes

Prior to the earthquake, child marriage was already a significant issue. In 2022, significant increases in child marriages in the southeast (and within the Syrian community) were reported.¹⁵² While child marriage is an issue - primarily for girls (both Syrian and Turkish), Syrian refugee girls are more likely to be married before the age of 18 compared to Turkish girls.

Weak legal protection, cultural and socio-economic factors, including displacement and changes in family circumstances,¹⁵³ perpetuate child marriage of Syrian refugee girls. More generally, it is well evidenced that displaced girls also face higher risk of gender-based violence – including child marriage and sexual exploitation – than boys in the aftermath of a disaster like an earthquake.¹⁵⁴

Six provinces affected by the earthquake, including four included in our research (Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis and Şanlıurfa), were also among the 21 provinces with the highest rates of child marriage¹⁵⁵ prior to the disasters.¹⁵⁶ The earthquakes triggered new instances of child marriage, with prevalence rising by 21% in some communities.¹⁵⁷ By weakening family and community structures and amplifying stress, insecurity and instability, the earthquakes forced parents to marry girls for “safety”.¹⁵⁸

The risk of child marriage in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes was also further exacerbated by displacement and by the decision of Türkiye' Diyanet – the country's most important religious body – to authorise the marriage of adopted orphans by foster families.¹⁵⁹

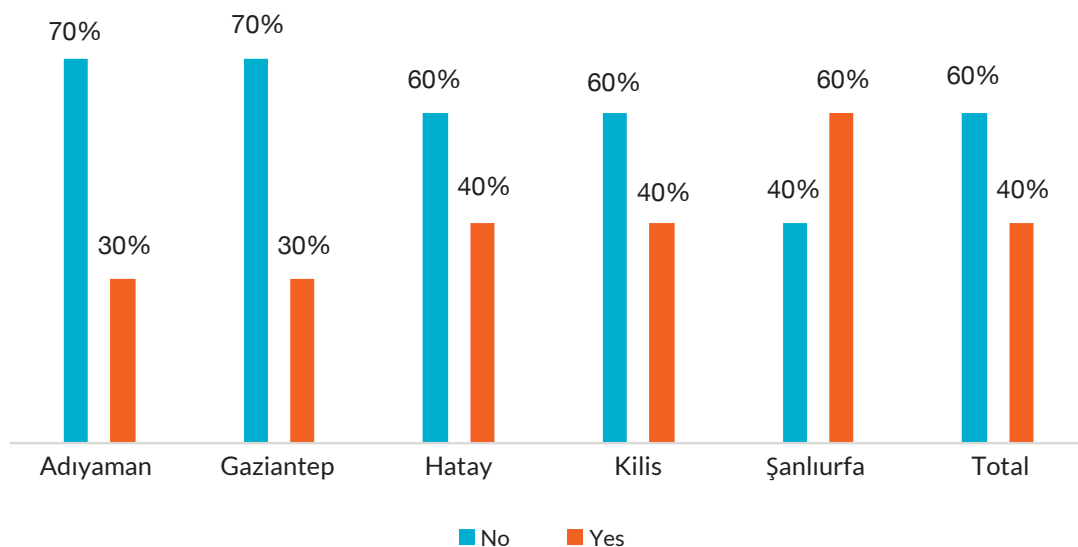
While 60% of all caregivers surveyed reported not being aware of any child marriages among unaccompanied and separated children after the earthquakes, there were wide variations between locations. In Şanlıurfa especially, 60% of respondents were aware of new child marriages following the disasters, followed by 40% of caregivers in Hatay and Kilis. The main reasons provided were the existing practice of child marriage among Syrian refugees and differing poverty rates, but across locations a majority of caregivers did not know why child marriage increased.



In addition, there were large differences in community members’ perception of increased risks of child marriage after the earthquakes between locations. While 65% of community members across all locations did not report any increase in risks of child marriage after the earthquakes, **70% of respondents in Kilis thought that more**

children were at risk of getting married early. Deteriorating living conditions, displacement, lack or loss of family members/caregivers, and low awareness of the protection risks associated with child marriage were the main reasons reported for post-earthquake child marriages.

CAREGIVERS' AWARENESS OF CHILD MARRIAGES AMONG UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN POST-EARTHQUAKES



The unaccompanied and separated children we spoke to also told us of the increased practice of child marriage in their community due to economic hardship, loss of guardians, and societal and familial expectations. For girls, child marriage was also perceived to be the “answer” to instability and lack of shelter, and for some a way out of overcrowded living conditions.

“I heard about many children who got married after the earthquake because they lost their families and their support and anchor. Marriage was an alternative to having a family with them. I think this marriage will fail because both parties are still in their childhood, and marriage requires responsibility.”—Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“Many girls got married, especially after the earthquakes, because they were looking for a place to live after their houses were destroyed and they were displaced, and the tents are too cramped for them with more than one family in the same tent, meaning a large number of siblings forced them to rush into marriage. I feel injustice and inequality compared to other children.”—Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“I know of a relative who lost her family in the earthquake, and her relatives had to marry her off at 16 so they wouldn’t have to bear her expenses.” - Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Kilis.

The disasters led to increased engagement in hazardous forms of child labour

Türkiye has a comprehensive policy and legal framework on child labour. It ratified relevant International Labour Organization conventions, implemented a national programme and action plan against child labour, and established units against child labour.¹⁶⁰ 2018 was also declared the “Year of Elimination of Child Labour” in Türkiye.¹⁶¹ However, the Government of Türkiye has struggled to make significant progress on the issue, which was on the rise prior to the earthquakes in 2022,¹⁶² with at least 2 million child workers in the country - a number that doubles during the summer months.¹⁶³



On, average 60 children are killed whilst working every year in Türkiye.¹⁶⁴

Although this issue certainly affects Turkish children, Syrian refugee children – in particular boys in urban areas¹⁶⁵ – were already more likely to work and being out of school than their Turkish peers before the earthquakes.¹⁶⁶ Refugee children start working at a very early age¹⁶⁷ due to poverty, a lack of meaningful employment opportunities for adults, and systemic barriers to access education. Syrian children work in unskilled jobs as ‘cheap labour’ in hazardous industries such as garment-making, construction, and seasonal agriculture. Due to their low social



A local market affected by the Syria earthquake before World Vision Syria Response and its partner began rehabilitating.
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, ULUSLARARASI INSANI YARDIMLAŞMA DERNEĞİ.

status and multiple forms of marginalisation, they are exposed to exploitation - including labour exploitation - by criminal gangs. Yet, there is virtually no quantitative data about the extent of the Syrian child labour force, including the number of refugee children out of school and working.¹⁶⁸

SPOTLIGHT: Education disruptions have increased the risk of child labour

The earthquakes destroyed 1,842 educational facilities and severely damaged 637.¹⁶⁹ The disasters disrupted the education of nearly four million school children, including 350,000 refugees and migrants.¹⁷⁰

The effects of the disasters on children's education were reported by caregivers and community members:

- 48% of caregivers across all locations said that the earthquakes moderately disrupted children's education, and 32% that they caused major disruption on learning. Education in **Gaziantep and Hatay was the most severely affected, with some respondents reporting school closures.**
- 57% of community members reported the earthquakes moderately disrupted children's education, followed by 41% of respondents who said the disasters caused major disruption to learning. **A large majority of community actors (70%) in Gaziantep and Hatay said that education has been majorly impacted.**

The combination of prolonged education disruptions, including school closures and loss of livelihoods and employment for Syrian refugee families, is likely to have contributed to school drop outs and child labour. In addition, refugee children¹⁷¹ are more likely to have been impacted due to pre-existing socio-economic conditions and systemic barriers in accessing education. This is especially the case for unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children who lack documentation or who receive no support.

The impact of the earthquakes on child labour was acknowledged by both caregivers and community members. **A staggering 90% of community members across the locations said they had noticed increased risks of child labour, with 100% of respondents in Adiyaman, Kilis and Şanlıurfa reporting that the earthquakes have been a 'push factor' for child labour.**

A large majority of community respondents (74%) also believe that exploitation has increased. Economic need (30%) is the main factor identified by community members for increased child labour and exploitation followed by loss of family (22%), loss of education and family pressure (16%). Community members noted that street work (vending/begging) became the most relevant type of child labour after the earthquakes, followed by manufacturing (e.g. factories, workshops) and manual/construction work. However, there was little differences observed in terms of other types of labour before and after the earthquakes. **Caregivers identified financial need (35%), family separation and family pressure (both 27%)** as the main reasons for children's engagement in labour after the disasters across all locations.

Unaccompanied and separated children in Gaziantep and Hatay told us that they were having to work in hazardous and demanding environments to support themselves (and in some cases, their siblings) even before the earthquakes. Other children also explained that while they were not working before the disasters, they have had to start working after the earthquakes. Echoing adults' perceptions of the reasons for increased child labour, children told us that the main reasons for engaging in child labour after the earthquakes were economic hardship, loss of family members or caretakers, and the necessity to support remaining family members. Children also reported working in the informal sector across various industries such as hospitality, construction, and garment. Some also reported collecting and selling scrap metal. They told us of the long working hours and being under-paid, and shared how physically and emotionally exhausting this work is. Some children also reported sustaining injuries.

“I worked in many jobs, like in factories and workshops, to secure a livelihood for me and my siblings. I could not continue my studies fully, and my work experience was horrible. I worked long hours as a worker, but the pay was half that of an adult.” - Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“Some children have started working in collecting scrap metal from where the building debris is dumped. These kids go every day to gather iron, copper, and aluminium.” - Boys FGD, 8-12 years old, Hatay.

“Some children may have to do tough work, such as carrying heavy luggage or working in difficult conditions to help their family adapt to the new circumstances after the earthquakes.” - Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Kilis.

The earthquakes have amplified severe mental health conditions among unaccompanied and separated children

The earthquake’s psychological and emotional impacts have amplified existing mental health issues caused by socio-economic crises, including COVID-19, and existing violence against children.¹⁷² Syrian refugee children in particular, had already been exposed to prior traumatic events such as conflict, displacement, and violence, and already

experienced symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety.¹⁷³ A World Vision assessment conducted in 5 districts of Southeast Türkiye in May 2023 revealed the lasting mental health impacts of these disasters on children, with over 55% of children saying they regularly felt upset when remembering the event and experiencing unwanted images and thoughts.¹⁷⁴ For UASC, lack of parental or care support, low social status, and existing protection risks further have heightened the risk of significant psychological trauma.

The mental health of unaccompanied and separated children after the earthquakes was highlighted by caregivers and community members alike as a key concern:

- **41% of community actors across all locations believe that mental health symptoms or issues among UASC are highly prevalent.** In Gaziantep and Sanliurfa, 70% and 60% of respondents respectively highlighted the high prevalence of mental health conditions among unaccompanied and separated children.
- **86% of caregivers also identified various psychological issues**, such as low energy, loss of interest in activities, intense fear and anxiety related to the earthquakes **as the top concern for the children they care for.** In Adiyaman and Şanlıurfa, all caregivers said mental health concerns for the children they care for have increased since the earthquakes.



World Vision Syria Response staff laughing with a child.
© World Vision Syria Response, Zaher Jaber.

In Hatay and Gaziantep, children were unequivocal about the devastating mental health toll of the earthquakes. In addition to the trauma of having experienced the disasters first hand, they have to deal with the loss of their homes, education, and, most importantly, their loved ones. They have experienced drastic changes to their entire lives, such as moving to a new location, struggling financially, and having to start working to support themselves. As a result, children have lost the fragile sense of normalcy and stability they had, and are struggling to adjust to their new lives.

“Fear has become my companion. I’m afraid of any movement or sound. I’m afraid of losing my new loved ones, my neighbours, and my friends, and my new school, after I tried hard to fit in a new place where I don’t belong and alone without my mom and dad.” - Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“The earthquakes have caused us many psychological problems; getting out from under the rubble is difficult. Now, every time there’s a tremor, we get terrified.” - Girls FGD, 8-12 years old, Hatay.

“Some children struggle with dealing with the loss of their parents or homes due to the earthquake, which affects their emotional stability.” - Boys FGD, 13-17 years old. Kilis.

SPOTLIGHT: Invisible and forgotten - unaccompanied and separated refugee children with disabilities

There is no consistent data on refugees with disabilities¹⁷⁵, including children, in Türkiye. In addition, due to the lack of monitoring systems for children in care, there is also no information about the situation of refugee children with disabilities in care in the country. However, based on what we know of the situation of Syrian refugee children (including the multiple challenges they face to access services and the heightened vulnerability of children with disabilities to disasters and protection risks) it is evident that Syrian refugee children with disabilities who were unaccompanied or separated before the earthquakes or who experienced family separation after the disasters face increased and additional challenges to their peers without additional needs, and higher risks of violence, stigma and discrimination, isolation, and exclusion.¹⁷⁶

56% of caregivers across all 5 locations highlighted that unaccompanied and separated children with mental disabilities have the highest level of needs, followed by those with cognitive impairments (27%). None of the caregivers identified any specific challenges due to unaccompanied or separated children with a physical disability.

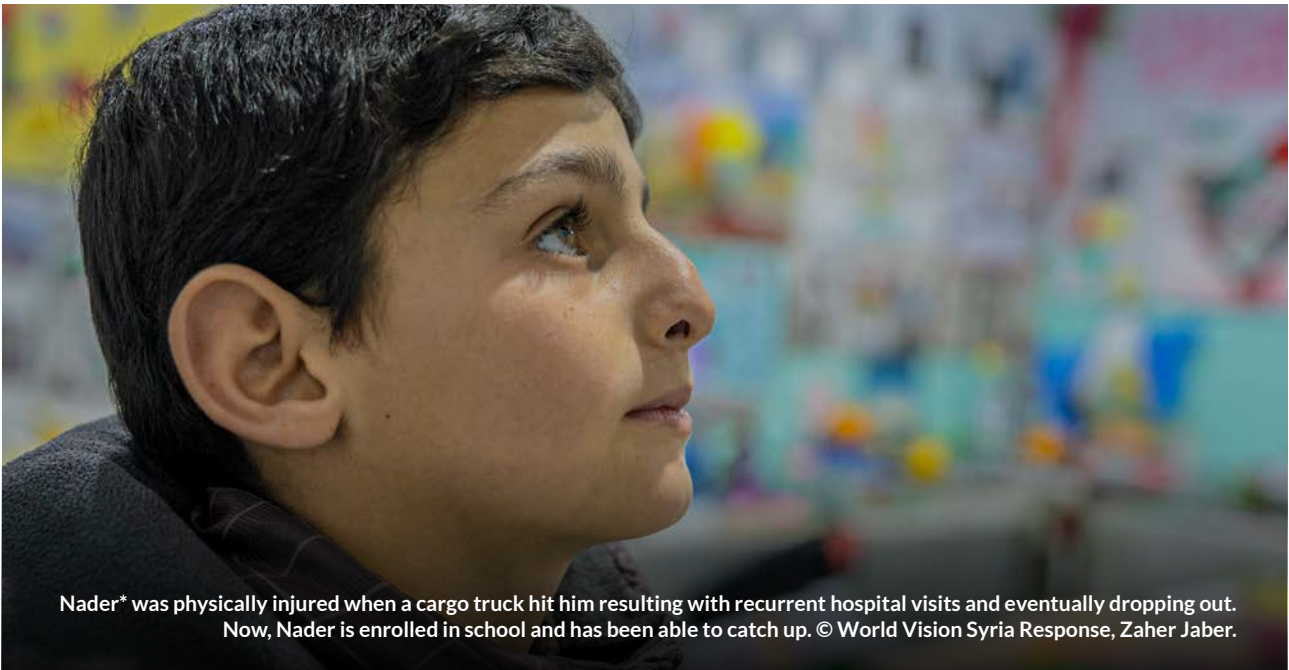
Children we spoke to elaborated on the many barriers faced by their peers with disabilities irrespective of their family status, such as physical limitations, social exclusion, lack of access to education and employment, and the profound effect of the earthquakes on their mental health and well-being.

“They are called people with special needs. I think their name alone explains the difficulties of their lives, especially after the earthquake. Life has become difficult for us, the healthy ones, so imagine how it is for them. And if they lose their parents, I think their situation becomes very dire.”—Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“Children with disabilities may face challenges in mobility, communication, social integration, and may also suffer from bullying, as well as in building and maintaining friendships.” - Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Kilis.

Despite their specific needs, Syrian refugee children with disabilities have been neglected in the humanitarian response to the earthquakes.¹⁷⁷ In the context of refugees in particular, the exclusion of people with disabilities from the response reflects the long-standing lack of engagement of the humanitarian community in engaging with refugees with disabilities.

As a result of the earthquakes, children refugees with disabilities have found themselves displaced to temporary sites with inadequate sanitation facilities, and without access to medical care, including MHPSS, specialist services and lack of suitable assistive devices such as wheelchairs. For unaccompanied and separated refugee children with disabilities, the disasters will have significantly worsened protection risks and neglect, and existing immense hardship. The earthquakes will have compounded their invisibility further.



Nader* was physically injured when a cargo truck hit him resulting with recurrent hospital visits and eventually dropping out. Now, Nader is enrolled in school and has been able to catch up. © World Vision Syria Response, Zaher Jaber.

One year on, the critical needs of unaccompanied and separated refugee children affected by the earthquakes remain unaddressed

The needs of unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children have significantly increased after the earthquakes due to multiple factors of vulnerability severely impacting their exposure to violence, discrimination, and neglect. Refugees' exclusion from the government's post-earthquakes emergency assistance,¹⁷⁸ including their removal from emergency shelters and denial or confiscation of aid,¹⁷⁹ and poorly coordinated efforts aggravated existing and new UASC's lack of access to critical support.

60% of caregivers in all locations (except for Şanlıurfa) reported that the primary challenge faced by unaccompanied and separated children after the earthquakes was access to basic services and safety.

Both caregivers and community members also highlighted significant gaps in children's access to essential services, such as safe spaces, MHPSS, education and protection, due to lack of effective assistance. **58% of caregivers believe that the current support systems provided by local authorities or I/NGOs for unaccompanied and separated children are "moderately effective".**

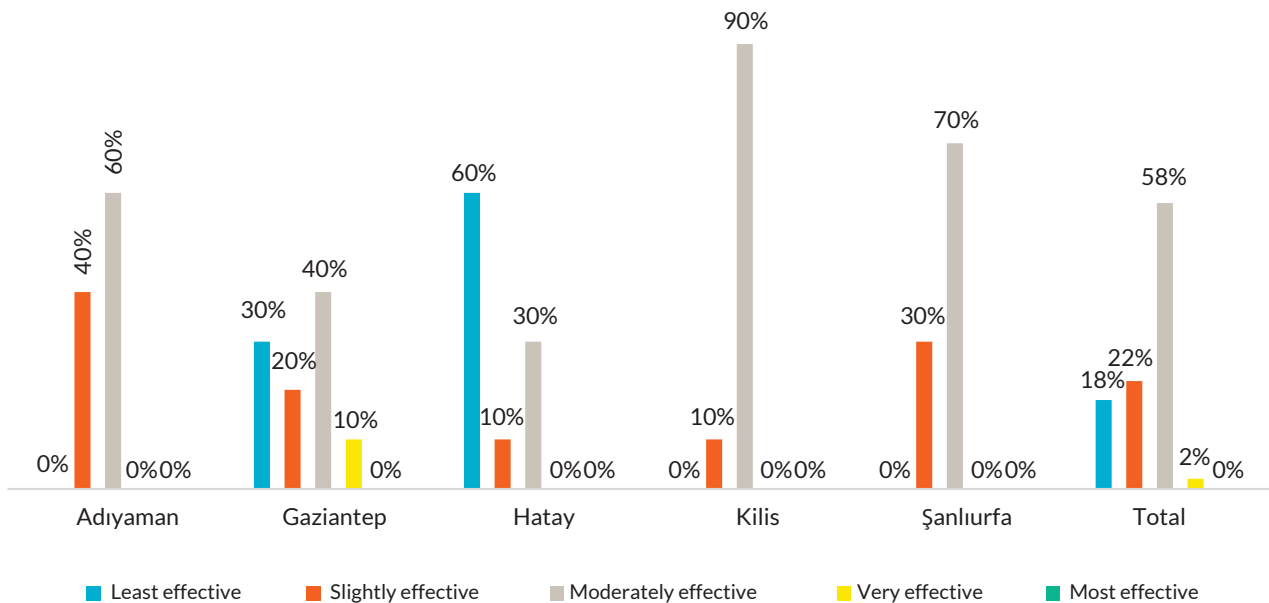
However, there are differences between provinces, with 60% of respondents in Hatay finding aid systems "least effective", and 50% in Gaziantep observing that they are slightly or least effective.

When considering different types of services, a majority of caregivers said that health (56%) and education (58%) services were "moderately effective", compared with a higher prevalence of respondents across locations reporting that **child protection (48%) and MHPSS (56%) were "least effective"**. There were some notable differences between respondents' perception of the effectiveness of services varied depending on their location. For example, **100% of respondents in Hatay said MHPSS and child protection services are "least effective" compared with 0-20% of respondents in other locations.**

Community members echoed caregivers' views on UASC's reduced access to essential services, in particular MHPSS and child protection. **According to them, the main services less frequently accessed by UASC after the earthquakes are MHPSS (27%), protection (24%), education (21%), safe spaces (16%) and health (11%).** Child protection and MHPSS were also reported as being only "least effective".

The child protection system was also highlighted as ineffective to address the increase in protection

CAREGIVERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEVEL OF EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS PROVIDED TO UASC



risks such as child labour and child marriage. **84% of all community members said that current child protection services are not meeting the needs of children. 100% of respondents in Hatay and Şanlıurfa held that opinion.**

According to the majority (57%) of community members across locations, the most important longer-term strategy needed for address the needs of unaccompanied and separated children is the provision of essential services such as food, housing, and education. In addition, they provided

examples of concrete actions needed to address the main protection risks faced by unaccompanied and separated children such as sexual abuse and neglect, exploitation, and physical and emotional abuse. They include training and educating caregivers and educators on recognising signs of abuse and neglect, emphasising the need for immediate reporting and removal of children from dangerous situations, implementing strict laws against child labour and exploitation, and providing care and basic support for neglected children.



World Vision Syria Response Partner during solid waste management services in a Syria displacement camp. © World Vision Syria Response Partner, Action for Humanity.

Child protection funding is insufficient to address children's growing protection needs

Our research findings reflect the gap between children's increasing protection needs and the proportion of funding allocated to child protection in the humanitarian response to the earthquakes and the Syrian crisis. A quick analysis of funding trends for child protection in Syria and Türkiye pre- and post-earthquakes shows that this sector remains under-prioritised. Despite the number of children in need of protection increasing from 6 million in 2021 to 6.4 million in 2022, child protection funding received for Syria was only funded at 15% that year.¹⁸⁰ Although there is additional funding from multi-sectoral programming (but data is not available),¹⁸¹ child protection remains one of the most under-funded areas in the Syria response.

While the earthquakes generated significant emergency funding, figures show that protection was underfunded. Child protection was also not categorised as stand-alone sectors. Although the Syria Earthquake Flash Appeal 2023 was fully funded, there was no specific funding targets for child protection and only 62% of the protection sector funding requirements were met.¹⁸² The Türkiye Earthquake Flash Appeal 2023¹⁸³ was only funded at around 56%¹⁸⁴ and only 67% of the protection funding requirements were met.¹⁸⁵ The Appeal did not provide specific funding requirements for the child protection sector.

The Syrian Arab Republic Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) 2023 and Syrian Arab

Republic Humanitarian Response Plan 2023 were also significantly under-funded, with only 14.6% and 37.8% of the funding requirements met.¹⁸⁶ The protection sector was only 17%¹⁸⁷ and 43% funded for each respective plan.¹⁸⁸

Data remains a significant issue to adequately track child protection funding, even more so for different groups of children including unaccompanied and separated children. Despite becoming a stand-alone sector within OCHA's Financial Tracking Services (FTS), child protection often remains categorised under the wider funds allocation for the "protection" sector, making it challenging to track specific investments in child protection intervention. It also means that available figures can either be inflated in line with the overall protection allocations, or be hidden under the broad "protection" sector category. In addition, although mainstreaming of child protection within other sectors is a positive development, the absence of indicators and targets make it difficult to track what proportion of funding is for child protection specifically or how integrated or mainstreamed it is.¹⁸⁹

The lack of disaggregated data on children who are targeted by child protection interventions, including children who are unaccompanied and separated, also means that it is impossible to know how much of funding goes towards meeting the needs of those children.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This report provides a unique and unprecedented insight into the situation and needs of unaccompanied and separated children in NWS and unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children in Southern Türkiye. It spotlights the lack of data on the number and situation of UASC in both regions, and articulates why those children have been disproportionately impacted by the earthquakes.

Using primary data, the report also explores why the overlapping and complex negative effects of the disasters on unaccompanied and separated children in NWS and unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children in Türkiye did not happen in a vacuum. It argues that the disasters exacerbated existing inequalities and disproportionately affected some of the most marginalised children who were already severely disadvantaged by conflict, poverty, and their family and refugee status, and whose resilience and ability to cope with the disasters were severely eroded.

The report also provides the first intersectional analysis of the consequences of the earthquakes on unaccompanied and separated children. While all children faced heightened protection risks, they were all not affected equally. Gender, disability, refugee status and socio-economic factors and cultural and social norms have influenced the degree of children's exposure to the aftershocks of the earthquakes. Unaccompanied children in NWS had the least resources and support to protect themselves and to cope with the immediate aftershocks and the longer-term impacts of the earthquakes. As a result, they faced staggering protection risks.

By sharing the unique contributions from caregivers, community members and children

themselves, the report also provides an unprecedented picture of the needs of unaccompanied and separated children, and the critical gaps in the services they require. Children are falling through the cracks of weak, under-resourced and poorly coordinated care and protection systems. As a result, their most urgent and significant needs, especially MHPSS and child protection, are not being met. In addition, despite their critical role, caregivers of unaccompanied and separated children have been unable them to meet their needs after the earthquakes due to insufficient support received from local authorities and I/NGOs, despite facing additional challenges.

Although the research primarily focused on kinship care for unaccompanied and separated children, other types of alternative informal care that are predominant in NWS and in refugee communities in Southern Türkiye, in particular supervised independent living arrangements and siblings living in child-headed households. Children in unsupervised living conditions are at the highest risk of deprivation of their basic needs and of violence. However, there is a significant research gap on this form of alternative care.

The earthquakes have exposed the long-standing neglected crisis of unaccompanied and separated children in Northwest Syria and Türkiye. Family separation is a silent and growing emergency that has failed to be prioritised by humanitarians and donors alike, as seen in the post-earthquakes responses. Preventing family separation and addressing the needs of UASC in times of crises must become a priority. In addition, humanitarian actors must recognise and address the impacts of multiple factors of vulnerability such as gender, age and disabilities, on the protection risks for unaccompanied and separated children and the care arrangements they need.

Key recommendations - NWS

1. BETTER DATA & PRIORITISATION



Improve existing data collection systems for unaccompanied and separated children, with a focus on disaggregated information (gender, age, refugee status, disability) to improve short and longer-term prevention and response strategies.



Mainstream and strengthen data collection systems to identify unaccompanied and separated children, and children at risk of family separation as part of protection and multi-sectoral assessments during and in the aftermath of emergencies. These should include the identification of families at risk of separation, children in kinship care, foster care and in unsupervised living arrangements.



Map number and locations of residential facilities and identify key monitoring indicators for children in institutional care.



Prioritise programming to prevent and respond to family separation in times of emergencies and protracted conflicts, and include specific indicators and outcomes that focus on meeting the needs of unaccompanied and separated children in their diversity, preventing family separation and case management and family reunification.

2. INCREASED SUPPORT TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



Provide parents with financial and other forms of child support to enable them to meet the needs of their children and prevent family separation due to financial hardship.



Provide caregivers with adequate support for the unaccompanied and separated children in their care especially due to increased financial challenges after the earthquakes.



Ensure parents and caregivers have access to community based and stepped approach to MHPSS to prevent an

increase in negative changes in parenting/ caregiving and a decrease in warm and responsive parenting and caregiving.



Implement a concerted and systematic approach by the Syrian government, UN, and humanitarian actors to facilitate children's access to recognised civil registration documents and reforming Syria's gender discriminatory nationality law and practices.



Increase caregivers and community members' understanding and awareness of heightened protection risks for diverse groups of unaccompanied and separated children.

3. IMPROVE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES, ESPECIALLY MHPSS AND CHILD PROTECTION



Prioritise and provide targeted and tailored funding to meet the needs of UASC in their diversity and integrate children's emotional and psychological well-being across education, health and protection interventions in the Humanitarian Response Plans for Syria and the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund's annual allocations.



Monitor the access of unaccompanied and separated children to essential services and identify key barriers to access.



Invest in capacity building for mental health service providers to enable them to identify and address unaccompanied and separated children's mental health conditions and support families and caregivers.



Increase child protection actors' awareness and understanding of unaccompanied and separated children's vulnerabilities and heightened exposure to violence and neglect.



Increase coordination between humanitarian actors, local authorities, community actors and caregivers in order to increase the chances of reuniting them with family members and identify children at risk.



Invest in and strengthen the capacity of child protection actors on unaccompanied and separated children, and provide ongoing support and funding for specialised protection services and community-based care for them.



Ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of unaccompanied and separated children and their caregivers during the planning and delivery of the Syria’s humanitarian response, and incorporate their views and needs in humanitarian response plans, including in the Refugee, Resilience Regional Plan responding to the Syrian crisis.

Key recommendations – Southern Türkiye

1. BETTER DATA



Prioritise registration and documentation processes for unaccompanied and separated refugee children.



Improve existing data collection systems for unaccompanied and separated migrant and refugee children, with a focus on disaggregated information (gender, age, disability) to improve short and longer-term prevention and response care and protection strategies.



Increase data collection on the number and conditions of unaccompanied refugee children in various forms of alternative care including foster and residential care institutions.



Provide Refugee, Resilience Regional Plan (3RP) sector partners with technical capacity on data collection specific to unaccompanied and separated refugee children to facilitate the collection of data to improve evidence-based programming, inform advocacy efforts and policy development.



Produce a situation analysis on unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children in Türkiye.

2. PRIORITISE AND SUPPORT KINSHIP CARE FOR UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN WHEN ALL OPTIONS FOR FAMILY REUNIFICATION AND REINTEGRATION HAVE BEEN EXHAUSTED



Provide adequate and multiple forms of support for unaccompanied and separated children in their care, including financial and in-kind assistance, training on child development and trauma-informed care, and respite care services.



Ensure caregivers have access to MHPSS to prevent an increase in negative changes in caregiving and a decrease in warm and responsive caregiving.



Ensure that kinship care for unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children is considered and prioritised in development of relevant national policies and interventions, ensuring that their needs are recognised and addressed.



Ensure that Türkiye’s national policies on alternative care include supporting safe and effective kinship care for unaccompanied and separated refugee children.



Increase caregivers and community members’ understanding and awareness of heightened protection risks for unaccompanied and separated children in their diversity.

3. STRENGTHEN CHILD PROTECTION AND CARE SYSTEMS



Expand and resource the independent monitoring mechanism for child protection and care services, outlining reporting procedures for identified issues and ensuring feedback loops for improvement, and ensuring effective coordination with local authorities, community-based protection structures, care providers and I/NGOs.



Expand on the independent monitoring mechanism by outlining reporting procedures for identified issues and ensuring feedback loops for improvement.



Invest in and strengthen the technical capacity of child protection workers to inspect and monitor child protection and care systems, and ensure that cultural competency training is provided to better understand the specific needs of diverse groups of unaccompanied and separated children.



Ensure that the foster care system does not discriminate against non-Turkish children who should have access to the same services as their Turkish peer.



Increase child protection actors' awareness and understanding of unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children's vulnerabilities and heightened exposure to violence and neglect.

4. IMPROVE REFUGEE CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO ADEQUATE SERVICES, ESPECIALLY MHPSS AND CHILD PROTECTION



Improve unaccompanied and separated refugee children's access to legal documents.



Address systemic challenges such as discriminatory policies and language barriers that impact unaccompanied and separated refugee children's access to essential services.



Prioritise and adequately fund inclusive services for refugee children, including MHPSS, child protection and education.



Invest in capacity building for MHPSS to enable them to identify and address the mental health conditions of unaccompanied and separated children.



Increase coordination between humanitarian actors, local authorities and community actors to deliver targeted projects for unaccompanied and separated refugee children in their diversity.



Invest in and strengthen the capacity of child protection actors on unaccompanied and separated children and provide ongoing support and funding for specialised protection services and community-based care for UASC, including through the 3RP for Türkiye and Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund.



Ensure the meaningful and inclusive participation of unaccompanied and separated children and their caregivers in relevant policies and programmes, including through facilitating their participation in planning and implementation.

Across all priority areas set out above, the voices, perspectives and experiences of unaccompanied and separated children in their diversity must be heard and acted on by all concerned stakeholders engaged in delivering assistance and services in NWS and Southern Türkiye.



Children playing with the muddy roads in a Syrian displacement camp. © World Vision Syria Response Partner, Syria Relief and Development.

What children we spoke to asked for:

Northwest Syria

- Inclusive and safe recreational spaces and the opportunity to play and learn.
- A stable environment and a place to call home
- Safety
- Family and community involvement in their lives
- Kindness and support
- Financial aid and provision of essential needs such as food, clothing and shelter.
- Vocational training for children
- Adoption and care support



Southern Türkiye

- The opportunity to go to school
- Community-based support systems
- Kindness
- Recreational activities
- Better infrastructure and community engagement to enhance their daily lives and safety
- Safe shelter/home with a caring family
- Psychological and emotional support to help deal with trauma and loss of loved ones
- Financial assistance for education



ANNEX 1: STUDY METHODOLOGY

Overview of methodology

The research involved an integrated, multidimensional approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to ensure a balanced perspective on the complex issue of child protection in Northwest Syria and Southern Türkiye after the earthquakes. The methodology included:

- An evidence review of the key themes explored in the primary data collection.
- Surveys with caregivers and community members in selected locations in Northwest Syria and Southern Türkiye, with a balance between rural and urban areas.
- Focus groups with children with families and children who are unaccompanied or separated

Study locations

In Northwest Syria, the research took place in the governorate of Aleppo in the districts of Albab and Ezaz, and the governorate of Idlib in the districts of Harem and Idlib. In Southern Türkiye, the study was conducted in five provinces (Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis, Adiyaman, and Şanlıurfa).

Survey samples

Surveys were conducted with caregivers and community members, both men and women, in each location. The main eligibility criteria was that participants must be directly involved with unaccompanied and/or separated children in the affected regions.

Northwest Syria (NWS)

Profile of caregivers

Gender		Age			Governorate		
Female	Male	18-30	31-50	+51	Aleppo	Idlib	Total
13	12	4	22	24	25	0	25
13	12				0	25	25
26	24				25	25	50

Profile of community members

Gender		Age			Governorate		
Female	Male	18-30	31-50	+51	Aleppo	Idlib	Total
13	13	12	38	2	26	0	26
12	14				0	26	26
25	27				26	26	52

Type of community members

Community member category	Gender		Governorate		
	Female	Male	Aleppo	Idleb	Total
Child protection officer	3	4	1	6	7
Community leader	1	2	2	1	3
INGO/NGO representative	2	4	3	3	6
Mental health professional	2	4	2	4	6
Nurse	1	1	2	0	2
Social worker	12	4	9	7	16
Teacher	4	8	7	5	12
Total	25	27	26	26	52

Southern Türkiye

Profile of caregivers

Gender		Age			Province						
Female	Male	18-30	31-50	+51	Adıyaman	Gaziantep	Hatay	Kilis	Şanlıurfa	Total	
6	4	11	30	9	10	0	0	0	0	10	
7	3				0	10	0	0	0	0	10
6	4				0	0	10	0	0	0	10
6	4				0	0	0	10	0	0	10
5	5				0	0	0	0	0	10	10
30	20				10	10	10	10	10	10	10

Profile of community members

Gender		Age			Province						
Female	Male	18-30	31-50	+51	Adıyaman	Gaziantep	Hatay	Kilis	Şanlıurfa	Total	
5	6	17	31	3	11	0	0	0	0	11	
7	3				0	10	0	0	0	0	10
6	4				0	0	10	0	0	0	10
6	4				0	0	0	10	0	0	10
6	4				0	0	0	0	0	10	10
30	21				11	10	10	10	10	10	10

Type of community members

	Gender		Province					Total
	Female	Male	Adiyaman	Gaziantep	Hatay	Kilis	Şanlıurfa	
Camp manager	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
Child protection officer	3	1	2	0	1	1	0	4
Community leader	1	4	0	1	3	1	0	5
Doctor	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	2
INGO/NGO representative	2	2	1	0	1	2	0	4
Mental health professional	5	1	1	1	3	1	0	6
Nurse	4	0	1	0	0	1	2	4
Religious leader	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
Social worker	2	3	0	2	1	2	0	5
Teacher	13	6	4	6	1	1	7	19
Total	30	21	11	10	10	10	10	51

Focus group discussions

We conducted 8 focus group discussions per region with children. Children were equally divided between unaccompanied/separated children and children in family care. In Southern Türkiye, FGDs were conducted in three provinces (Kilis, Gaziantep and Hatay). Each focus group consisted of 5-7 children with groups divided based on their age and care status, specifically:

1. Unaccompanied/separated boys aged 8-12.
2. Unaccompanied/separated boys aged 13-17.
3. Unaccompanied/separated girls aged 8-12.
4. Unaccompanied/separated girls aged 13-17.
5. Boys in family care, aged 8-12.
6. Boys in family care, aged 13-17.
7. Girls in family care, aged 8-12.
8. Girls in family care, aged 13-17.

Participants were selected through local organisations, schools, and community centres. Children's participation was voluntary with informed consent and confidentiality assurance.

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wvi.org/syria-response

Hamzah Barhameyeh
World Vision Syria Response
Communications & Advocacy Manager
hamzah_barhameyeh@wvi.org

Balquees Bsharat
World Vision Syria Response
Advocacy Advisor
balquees_bsharat@wvi.org