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Migrant children and COVID-19

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Key points

- ❑ Global pandemics have historically been drivers of further displacement and migration; people continue to move, posing a challenge to COVID-19 response
- ❑ Some countries use COVID-19 to impose draconian measures towards asylum seekers
- ❑ The pandemic crisis has put a halt to search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean because European countries prohibit boats carrying migrants to disembark under the pretext of prevention of the coronavirus transmission
- ❑ COVID-19's rapid spread poses particular challenges for vulnerable populations, notably migrants and refugee (M&R) children living in camps and urban settlements, or asylum detention centres

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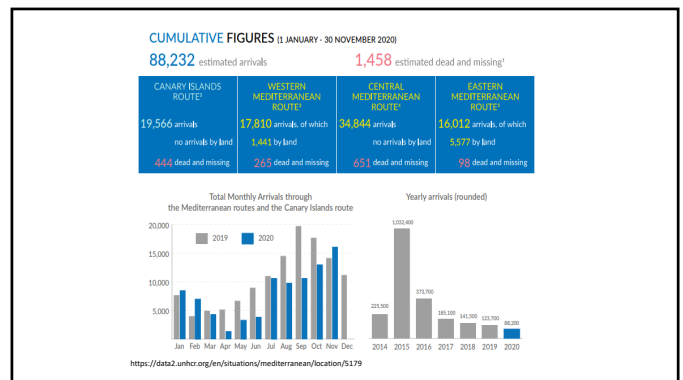
Migration and mobility

- ❑ The number of international migrants globally was 272 million in 2019 (3.5% of the world's population); 52% male and 48% female, 13.9% children
- ❑ The global refugee population was 25.9 million in 2018; 52% <18 years of age (13 million) – 57% originating from Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan



https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf


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How the pandemic COVID-19 is impacting migrant and refugee children

- ❑ Within a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic developed from a remote threat to an international public health, humanitarian, and socio-economic crisis with real and immediate impact on daily life
- ❑ In order to reduce disease transmission, the majority of countries worldwide ensure new policies by declaring national emergencies such as strict response measures including lockdowns, and by implementing punitive consequences
- ❑ As such, both the disease and the associated response measures increased risk factors in already vulnerable populations, such as M&R children



1. Thompson, L. A., & Rasmussen, S. A. (2020). What does the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) mean for families? JAMA Pediatrics. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.0828>
 2. Nay, D. (2020). Can a virus undermine human rights? The Lancet Public Health, 5, E238–E239. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30092-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30092-X)

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How the pandemic COVID-19 is impacting migrant and refugee children

- ❑ Worldwide, 52 % of migrant children and over 90 % of displaced children live in low- and middle-income countries where health systems have been overwhelmed and disrupted as a result of pandemic
- ❑ In low- and middle-income countries, migrant and displaced children live in deprived urban areas or slums, makeshift shelters, overcrowded camps, settlements, or reception centres
- ❑ In high-income countries, the safety of many migrant and displaced children is also under threat; many unaccompanied minors had been left unprotected prior to pandemic due to lack of provision of care and shelter by authorities

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/migrant-and-displaced-children-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>

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How the pandemic COVID-19 is impacting migrant and refugee children

- ❑ M&R children have poor access to accurate public health information, and communication networks due to language barriers or fear contact with public authorities
- ❑ Misinformation on the spread of COVID-19 can exacerbate the xenophobia and discrimination that migrant and displaced children and their families face

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/migrant-and-displaced-children-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>

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How the pandemic COVID-19 is impacting migrant and refugee children

- ❑ Worsening of their poverty with job and income losses of their families
- ❑ Deprivation in their access to health care and protective services
- ❑ Interrupted access to education
- ❑ Travel and movement restrictions with a negative impact on their safety and well-being; migrants with children and their families have been left stranded and at risk of further harm and longer separation

Those whose lives are already marked by insecurity will be affected even more seriously; migrant and displaced children are among the most vulnerable populations on the globe

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/migrant-and-displaced-children-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>

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How the pandemic COVID-19 is impacting migrant and refugee children

A UN report grouped the impacts on children in general into four dimensions:

1. Poverty
2. Survival and health
3. Learning
4. Safety

United Nations, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Children", Policy brief, 15 April 2020. Available at https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief

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Health risks in migrant and refugee children and COVID-19

Children usually exhibit mild symptoms of COVID-19 however, vulnerable children such as migrants and refugees may experience health risks which increase the impact of SARS CoV-2 on their health:

- Poverty may lead to inadequate nutrition
- Overcrowded living conditions increase the risk of transmission



1. Mellis, C. (2020). Children may be less affected than adults by novel coronavirus (COVID-19). *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 56(4), 657. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.14878>

2. Butler, M. J., & Barrientos, R. M. (2020). The impact of nutrition on COVID-19 susceptibility and long-term consequences. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.04.040>

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Health risks in migrant and refugee children and COVID-19

- Lack of access to water, soap, and sanitation make proper personal hygiene impossible
- Limited access to medical treatment and provision of health care services may increase vulnerability to COVID-19 infection

These factors increase the risk of these children to experience the effects of COVID-19 than their peers in stable homes and increase the risk of transmission of the disease



Rasmussen, S. A., & Thompson, L. A. (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 and children: what pediatric health care clinicians need to know. *JAMA Pediatrics*. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.1224>

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The impact of COVID-19 and related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Poverty

- ❑ According to the World Bank 40 to 60 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty, as a result of COVID-19 economic consequences
- ❑ Families of migrant and displaced children are more vulnerable to job loss or economic crisis
- ❑ The well-being of families and children will be affected, with more children dropping out of school, being forced to seek work, migrating, or being subjected to child marriage or trafficking
- ❑ Poverty and poor nutrition can affect their immune system and increase their vulnerability to COVID-19 infection



<https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-coronavirus-global-poverty-why-sub-saharan-africa-might-be-region-hardest-hit-by-covid-19>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- ❑ M&R populations face higher risk of exposure to infectious disease due to restricted health care services and suboptimal living conditions
- ❑ M&R populations may also face the risk of exclusion and of being deprioritized at a time when Governments struggle to support their national populations

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- ❑ Overcrowded conditions make the implementation of recommended measures difficult
- ❑ Lack of access to water, soap, and sanitation make proper personal hygiene impossible and increase the risk of transmission of the virus



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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- ❑ Limited access to medical treatment for underlying or co-occurring medical conditions (e.g. malnutrition) may increase a child's susceptibility to the virus and the risk to other communicable and non communicable diseases
- ❑ Access to public health services for migrant and refugee children may be limited, or deliberately avoided, particularly if they are undocumented



<https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/refugee-and-migrant-communities-brace-covid-19-already-dire-conditions-greek-islands>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- ❑ Underlying conditions among displaced children – such as malnutrition and communicable and non communicable diseases – can deteriorate
- ❑ Interruption of immunization would threaten the health and well-being of vulnerable migrant and displaced children e.g.
- ❑ Vaccination campaigns including preventive and responsive measles vaccination have been paused or postponed in many countries to help avert further transmission of COVID-19

www.who.int/immunization/diseases/measles/statement_missing_measles_vaccines

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- ❑ Migrants and refugees may have limited access to public health information programming due to exclusion
- ❑ Migrants and refugees may lack the financial means to manage periods of self-isolation or quarantine or seek health care
- ❑ Poor integration of these people in hosting countries further limits access to health care and social benefits

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

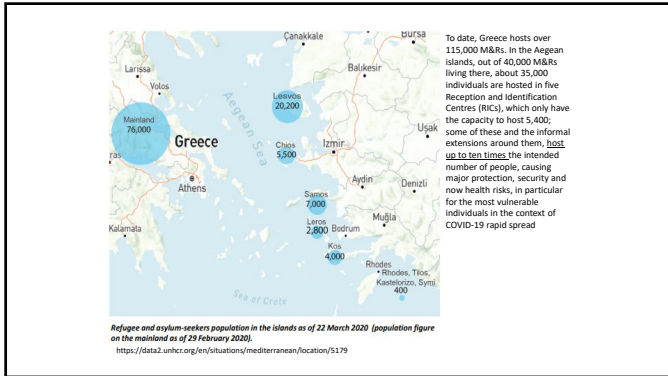
Survival and health

- ❑ In the Greek islands, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees, including children, live in reception and identification centres, under suboptimal conditions
- ❑ Approximately 35000 migrants and asylum seekers live in the camps of Greek Aegean islands of Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesvos, and Samos – over 6 times their capacity
- ❑ Nearly 2000 unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children, need to be transferred to appropriate accommodation facilities on the mainland, according to public health measures and guidelines



<https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/refugee-and-migrant-communities-brace-covid-19-already-dire-conditions-greek-islands>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- Camps in Greek hotspots are ≈8.5 times more densely populated than the Diamond Princes cruise ship, where transmission of the virus was 4 times faster than in Wuhan, China
- The hotspot in Moria, on the Island of Lesbos has the capacity for 2,800 people, but hosts approximately 19,000 people including children (the biggest refugee camp in Europe)
- Guidelines provided by health authorities for the prevention of COVID-19 are therefore difficult to be implemented under such conditions

<https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/refugee-and-migrant-communities-brace-covid-19-already-dire-conditions-greek-islands>
<https://www.rescue.org/report/covid-19-humanitarian-crisis-double-emergency>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- Greek authorities, UNICEF and other UN agencies and local partners have been collaborating in order to prevent the spread of the disease on the islands and to implement *measures in response to COVID-19* including:
 - Hygiene support with dissemination of hygiene kits with essential items (hand sanitizer, soap, diapers and disinfecting wipes)
 - Communication with communities with increasing awareness of parents and children on preventive measures providing distant learning adapting communication materials to suit local linguistic and cultural needs

<https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/refugee-and-migrant-communities-brace-covid-19-already-dire-conditions-greek-islands>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- Core relief items were provided such as blankets, sleeping bags, tents; temporary tent shelters were set up to conduct checks and provide care if required
- WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene support): Chemical toilets and hand washing stations were also provided for hygiene and sanitation support

<https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/refugee-and-migrant-communities-brace-covid-19-already-dire-conditions-greek-islands>
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/9/5f6073d5-4/unhcr-scales-immediate-shelter-support-moria-asylum-seekers-urges-long.html>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- Support medical response: Provision of surveillance and preparedness activities including the establishment of screening, isolation and quarantine areas
- Other critical activities: Legal aid and protection services, education
- M&Rs were undergoing rapid COVID-19 testing, by the national public health authorities, before entering the new facility to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19

<https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/refugee-and-migrant-communities-brace-covid-19-already-dire-conditions-greek-islands>
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/9/5f6073d5-4/unhcr-scales-immediate-shelter-support-moria-asylum-seekers-urges-long.html>

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UNHCR's key priorities and areas of intervention

<p>Health, water and sanitation and hygiene</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with ministries of health in affected countries to ensure inclusion of those forcibly displaced. Undertaking risk communication and promoting community engagement with an emphasis on hygiene practices and physical distancing. Ensuring and maintaining continued access to essential health services. 	<p>Cash assistance, shelter and core relief items</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring people of concern, specifically the most vulnerable, receive cash assistance and core relief items. Providing improved shelter and settlement conditions to reduce density and overcrowded living conditions.
<p>Protection and risk communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protecting and advocating for refugees, IDPs, stateless persons and host communities, including by maintaining and strengthening critical protection activities and services. Putting people at the centre of the response and working with existing protection monitoring and reporting networks to mitigate protection risks, including sexual and gender-based violence. Ensuring they have access to timely and accurate information and dedicated specific measures to ensuring communication is inclusive and accessible for all. 	<p>Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting schools to remain open where health conditions permit and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Expanding investments in online and offline distance education or alternative solutions, ensuring forcibly displaced children can keep learning.

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/covid-19>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health

- ❑ 243 people were tested positive for Covid-19 after being moved from the Moria camp to the temporary Kara Tepe facility (Sep 2020); all were asymptomatic with average age 24 years
- ❑ A medical area in the new site was established by UNHCR in accordance with WHO guidance, providing tents and isolation areas to support the national health authorities



<https://www.unicef.org/eca/stories/refugee-and-migrant-communities-brace-covid-19-already-dire-conditions-greek-islands>
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/9/516073db4/unhcr-scales-immediate-shelter-support-moria-asylum-seekers-ugres-long.html>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health-mental illness

- ❑ M&R children face psychological harms, such as pre-existing psychological trauma, stigma from host communities and marginalization
- ❑ Psychological conditions are aggravated by lockdown due to lack of recreational material/activities and access to school and to psychosocial support
- ❑ The sudden impacts on studies, jobs, the process of permit of stay of unaccompanied young people may lead to a variety of psychological problems such as apathy, isolation, frustration, mood swings and sleep disorders

Save the Children, COVID-19: Operational Guidance for Migrant & Displaced Children, version 1, April 2020. Available at <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/OperationalGuidanceCovid19andMigrationandDisplacement.pdf>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health-mental illness

Mental issues of M&R children who stay for long period of time behind barbed wire, without access to basic services, and under constant police surveillance may include

- Depression and anxiety
- Self-harm and suicide
- Inhumane living conditions
- Increase in aggressive behaviour
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Safety
- Family breakdowns
- Smuggling and trafficking



<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/tide-self-harm-and-depression-eu-turkey-deals-devastating-impact-child-refugees-and-migrants>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Survival and health-mental illness

- ❑ In Greece, some refugees and asylum-seekers are trained as paraprofessionals to address psychosocial needs, bridging national mental health and social services and staffing help lines in Arabic, English, Farsi and Greek, providing services such as psychosocial support, dissemination of information about COVID-19, liaising with protection services, and referrals to psychological or psychiatric specialists

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/covid-19>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Education

- ❑ M&R children are twice as likely not to get access to school than other children- even prior to the COVID-19 crisis
- ❑ Six million school-age children under UNHCR's mandate already had no school to go to prior to COVID-19
- ❑ Their problems in accessing education, range from enrolment difficulties to language barriers
- ❑ During the COVID-19 pandemic their education is likely to be limited or disappear completely



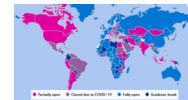
<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Education

- ❑ Most governments worldwide have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected around 1.5 billion students and in particular the more vulnerable and disadvantaged ones such as the millions of migrant and refugee children



<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Education

- ❑ Access to online resources which relies on the availability of electricity is out of reach for many M&R children in particular those living in remote settlements, refugee camps or informal settings
- ❑ The rapid transition to online learning has been challenging even for teachers in areas where information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and household connectivity is available
- ❑ This transition has been even nearly impossible in regions where there is no access to ICT and other distance methodologies such as M&R settlements

<https://en.unesco.org/news/startling-digital-dividedistance-learning-emerge>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Education

- ❑ In Greece learning opportunities were already limited on the islands RICs that host approximately 11,100 school-aged children of whom 1,600 are unaccompanied
- ❑ < 3% of school-aged children attend formal schools
- ❑ In line with the Government's closure of schools in Greece as part of COVID-19 response measure, UNHCR has been supporting the education of children on the islands through the development of six non-formal education centres, provision of self-learning material (e.g. online platforms, homework packages) and essential items (e.g. solar lamps) as well as legal and psychosocial support to children at risk

<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Education

- ❑ In displacement settings such as M&R settlements schools may also function as the focal point for access to/referral pathways for social services
- ❑ Mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, stress disorders) would be aggravated as a result of suspension of these services
- ❑ Lack of access to school/education would force children to work to offset economic strains, which may make returning to school after the pandemic subsides even more difficult

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>



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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Protection and safety

- ❑ Safety and security of M&R children may be affected as a result of financial implications of the COVID-19 pandemic:
 - more children will be working
 - getting pregnant or married
 - being sexually abused
 - being trafficked
 - domestic violence

Human Rights Watch, "COVID-19 and Child's Rights"

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The impact of COVID-19-Related response measures on migrant and refugee children

Protection and safety

- ❑ Lockdowns and confinement in small places may further aggravate the safety and well-being of children e.g. exploitation and social exclusion
- ❑ For M&R children living in camps sharing a small space with others, privacy becomes an issue; children are not always able to call hotlines since they do not own their own mobile phone



COVID-19 Impact on Refugees is Also Political | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank

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What actions must be taken?

- ❑ Inclusion of M&R children in preparedness, response, and mitigation efforts for COVID-19 considering the place they live, access to protective measures with participation of protective authorities
- ❑ Measures should proactively be taken against xenophobia, stigma, and discrimination in particular for M&R children separated from their families

United Nations Children's Fund, "Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children" (Children on the Move). Available at www.unicef.org/media/67221/file

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What actions must be taken?

- ❑ Provision of accessible, timely, culturally and linguistically appropriate, child friendly and relevant information on COVID-19 to all M&R children and families on the move
 - considering cultural barriers and disabilities
 - using preferred channels of information and sources which are trusted by M&R e.g. peer migrants, refugee networks, volunteers and frontline workers

United Nations Children's Fund, "Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children" (Children on the Move), Available at www.unicef.org/media/67221/file

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What actions must be taken?

- ❑ Access to COVID-19 testing, healthcare, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) should be provided
- ❑ Provision of good hygiene practices including clean water, basic toilets when transiting or for those living in camps and in urban areas

United Nations Children's Fund, "Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children" (Children on the Move), Available at www.unicef.org/media/67221/file

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What actions must be taken?

- ❑ Provision of safer living and housing conditions to avoid crowded environments and to allow for social distancing, including in shelters and camps
 - outbreaks can increase and exacerbate the risk for women and girls to experience gender-based violence!

United Nations Children's Fund, "Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children" (Children on the Move), Available at www.unicef.org/media/67221/file

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What actions must be taken?

- ❑ Avoidance of practices such as detention, deportations and mass expulsions of M&R children and families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic
 - these practices may threaten children's rights and health and are a risk to public health
 - every child's right to seek asylum, protection or to reunite with family members should never be compromised

United Nations Children's Fund, "Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children" (Children on the Move), Available at www.unicef.org/media/67221/file

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What actions must be taken?

- ❑ Implementation of education strategies for ongoing learning for all children and making schools safe and healthy considering that M&R children are already disproportionately affected by learning disruptions and make up a large proportion of the out-of-school child population
- ❑ Often M&R children living in poverty, depend on school lunches and other services being provided at schools; with schools closure, provision of alternative, safe options for these services is very important

United Nations Children's Fund, "Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children" (Children on the Move), Available at www.unicef.org/media/67221/file

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What actions must be taken?

- ❑ Expansion of social protection policies and programs is crucial to minimize the economic impact of COVID-19 on families
 - It is important to monitor and mitigate the socio-economic impact affecting migrants and their ability to support children

All responses must include a child-sensitive approach which upholds the principle of the best interests of the child!

United Nations Children's Fund, "Quick Tips on COVID-19 and Migrant, Refugee and Internally Displaced Children" (Children on the Move), Available at www.unicef.org/media/67221/file

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Conclusion

- COVID-19 is an emerging illness that is rapidly spreading worldwide
- Although the effects on children are less severe than those on adults, yet the pandemic and related response measures are associated with increased risk factors for vulnerable M&R children
- Millions of M&R children worldwide are already facing acute deprivations affecting their growth and development
- COVID-19 presents even greater challenges and threatens to disrupt their lives even further
- Therefore collaboration and unity are crucial to ensure health, welfare, safety, and protection for these vulnerable populations

