



# LOST AND ALONE

## Report overview

This report presents the findings from a unique piece of research conducted by WWSR in Northwest Syria (NWS) and Southern Türkiye, focusing on the February 2023 earthquakes' impact on unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) who were separated from their families during the disasters. It incorporates the diverse perspectives of caregivers, community members<sup>1</sup>, and crucially, Syrian UASC in some of the areas most affected by the earthquakes. Highlighting the critical role of community-based alternative care systems, the report points out severe gaps in existing services for children without parental care and calls for increased prioritization of Syrian UASC in humanitarian responses to the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, it notes the absence of specific details on the gender, disability, or refugee status of UASC in collected data, making these children largely invisible both as a group and in their diversity.

## Common trends across Northwest Syria and Southern Türkiye



The data gap on unaccompanied and separated children in both NWS and Southern Türkiye is shocking. There

is virtually no data on the situation or number of UASC. When data is available, it is not disaggregated, masking the diverse needs of boys, girls, and children with disabilities.



The impacts of the earthquakes have significantly increased unaccompanied and separated children's protection risks, including child marriage, child labor 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. However, caregivers struggle to cope with the financial and psychological impacts of overlapping crises with insufficient support.



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

<sup>1</sup> Note: When the terms "community members" and "caregivers" are mentioned, they specifically refer to those we have interviewed for this study.

## Key findings

Rise in UASC numbers post-earthquake:



- Northwest Syria and Southern Türkiye: More than half of the community members reported many unaccompanied and separated children in their areas who lost parental care due to the earthquakes.

Caregivers' challenges:



- Northwest Syria: Earthquakes exacerbated financial and mental health challenges for caregivers, limiting their ability to care for UASC. Financial support is notably scarce.
- Southern Türkiye: Caregivers face severe financial struggles and mental health issues, with 44% receiving no assistance at all, especially in Hatay and Adiyaman.

Increased vulnerabilities and protection concerns:



- Northwest Syria: The disasters intensified UASC's vulnerabilities, particularly affecting girls. Child marriage, child labour, exploitation, and mental health issues have become more prevalent. Economic need and family loss are cited as primary reasons for the increase in child labour.
- Southern Türkiye: Vulnerabilities and protection risks for UASC, especially girls, have increased. Child marriage and child labour have risen due to deteriorating living conditions. 90% of community members have observed increased child labour due to financial necessity and family separation.

Mental health deterioration:



- Northwest Syria: The mental health needs of UASC have worsened, with caregivers identifying signs of psychosocial distress such as sadness, loss of interest, low energy, and anxiety.
- Southern Türkiye: Caregivers report prevalent mental health issues among UASC, including depression, trauma, and earthquake phobia, with a unanimous increase in mental health concerns since the earthquakes among caregivers.

Societal and cultural impacts:



- Northwest Syria: Perceptions differ between governorates. In Aleppo, cultural norms negatively impact UASC protection, while in Idlib, they are viewed positively due to values encouraging the care of orphans.
- Southern Türkiye: Cultural norms and societal attitudes have mixed impacts. In Kilis, cultural norms negatively affect UASC

protection, while in Hatay, they are viewed positively for encouraging orphan care.

Unmet needs and ineffective support systems:



- Northwest Syria: A large majority of caregivers and community members think that existing child protection services including MHPSS, financial support and housing, do not address key protection risks for UASC (such as child marriage and child labour – including exploitation and trafficking).
- Southern Türkiye: Support systems and basic services such as MHPSS, health and child protection services provided by local authorities and non-governmental organisations for UASC are among the least effective in meeting the children's needs.

## Overview of recommendations

- Enhanced data collection: Improve the collection and sharing of data on UASC, emphasizing their diversity and the various informal and formal alternative care systems, particularly community-based ones.
- Prevention of family separation: Make the prevention of family separation during emergencies and support for family reunification top priorities.
- Increased support for caregivers: Boost support for parents, families, and caregivers through financial and in-kind contributions, along with mental health and emotional support, to foster a nurturing and stable environment for children and prevent family separation.
- Enhance access to essential services: Enhance UASC's access to quality, equitable, and specific essential services, especially MHPSS, child protection, and education.
- Capacity building for child protection workforce: Strengthen the skills and capacity of the child protection workforce in key areas of UASC programming like prevention of separation, case management, family tracing, reunification, and foster cross-sectoral coordination for holistic prevention and response strategies.
- Awareness and understanding: Increase the awareness and understanding among community actors and caregivers of the specific risks and needs of UASC in their area, including the barriers they face accessing support and services in accordance with their rights and best interests.
- Participation of UASC: Ensure the meaningful participation of UASC, community members, and caregivers in the planning and implementation of policies and programmes.