



RESEARCHING UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN ON THE MOVE: LESSONS LEARNED



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THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING EXPERIENCES WITH RESEARCHING REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

Those who are conducting **social research in everyday context** (opposed to the strictly controlled one) usually encounter series of obstacles on their way to understand the subject of their interest. These obstacles are often hard to anticipate and to control. Although research done in a “real” setting has great advantages in the terms of data validity as well as richness and complexity of gathered information, there are many factors that can make systematic data collection in such context difficult. Some of them are the very nature of the phenomenon, its stability, the sensitivity of the topic, the availability of respondents, their vulnerability, their legal status etc.

Migrations are especially interesting but also a challenging topic for the research, particularly if migrants themselves are the respondents. Migrants (especially in countries of transit) are often hard to reach and they can be reluctant to talk about their experiences or provide information about themselves and there is a language and sometimes cultural barrier between them and researchers. Also, they often do not stay in one place long enough for researchers to collect data or to properly monitor/ evaluate interventions. Organizations such as Save the Children conduct “practical research” or day-to-day data collection with various populations (especially children) they work with in order to understand them and support them better, but also to monitor the effect of the programs the organization implements. The aim of the practical research projects is not only to understand the studied phenomenon but to use evidence to feed into policies, or design more adequate program activities, which makes the task of data collection additionally complicated.

When it comes to **quantitative data on migration in transit countries** such as Serbia, there are some administrative data sources with information on this

population but they are either not always available for general public or offer just basic demographic data on this population (mostly gender, country of origin and whether they are adults or children). Also, the available data mostly cover only those migrants who came in contact with the authorities (or with agencies such as UNHCR) but usually not those who moved through irregular channels and were not caught by police, did not ask any organization for help or haven't applied for asylum (and we know that they exist). Although a quantitative ad hoc study on this population could give clues to understanding migrant and refugees' needs, motivations, attitudes, experiences, mental health state etc, such studies are rarely conducted. First of all, it is not sure what is exactly the population that one should be sampling (since only some of refugees and migrants are detectable and available to researchers), only a fraction of migrant and refugee population, those accommodated in the reception centres, would be accessible and that makes it hard to generalize the findings (unless in the topic is specific to the camps). Also, there are logistical problems to organize data collection with a larger number of respondents (getting approval from the authorities, or from caregivers, possible high rejection rate, questions must be asked by interviewers since there are illiterate people in the population, it is very hard to ensure that respondents answer most questions in order to be comparable etc.). There are also general problems with having migrants as respondents, some of which were described above.

These are just some of the reasons why most researchers studying refugees and migrants in transit opt for small samples and **qualitative methodology** in order to collect quality in-depth data. Although these are not fully representative samples of respondents, the qualitative studies require simpler logistics, they can be conducted quicker and it is usually easier to find enough

respondents. Also, the data collected gives way deeper insight into selected topics and the contact with the interviewer usually leads to respondents opening up more to sensitive topics and answering more questions. Since most research questions are designed in such a way to help improve programs or point out certain gaps in migrant protection, qualitative approach is more suitable especially if it is an exploratory research. Research done in interaction with children, whether they are migrants/ refugee children or not, is especially sensitive and calls for additional measures of precaution regardless of the methodology used. These measures are mostly aimed at child protection and safeguarding but also at collecting as valid data as possible. There is a lot of available literature on children as research participants that can guide the research with children. It is important to mention that, at the minimum, children require questionnaires to be adapted and interview strategies to conform to the children's developmental stage with the greater responsibility for researchers in terms of respondent protection.

Why is it important to share information about experiences with researching migrants and refugees?

First of all, there is not a great deal of widely available information about experiences on doing research with populations such as migrant children in countries of transit. Additionally, sometimes we think that lessons learned from the research process are not as important as the answers to our research questions, and other times we think that most of what we have learned is already widely known to the experts or the general public, that our insights might be too narrow and specific and not useful to others.

We believe that knowing which obstacles one might meet while conducting research on UASC, which behaviours could be beneficial or which parts of the research process we should focus special attention/ additional recourses on, could be very useful to others doing research in similar conditions. Sharing our experiences might prompt also other researchers to more often share their practical experiences related to the research process adding to the pool of knowledge that could facilitate better understanding of our beneficiaries and their needs.

During 2018 and 2019 the Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub carried out a research on informal practices of unaccompanied and separated children traveling the “Balkans route”¹. This research focused on children's experiences on the route, their survival driven practices, the ways they find resources, different ways they handle dangerous situations, as well as their social network system during the travel. This was a qualitative study with young unaccompanied boys, traveling through Serbia on their way to their destination countries. They were interviewed in Serbia during the fall and winter of 2018 and 2019 in presence of their state appointed guardians. The sample has been designed in such way that the quotas roughly reflected the ethnic characteristic of the UASC population registered by SCI in Serbia. We interviewed more than 40 children, but included 36 interviews in the final report since some of the interviews were interrupted/ or made invalid for different reasons. Apart from interesting findings that came as the answers to our research questions, there were numerous obstacles that we faced during the implementation of the project. These obstacles led us to new insights that were not necessarily directly related to our research topic but still influenced the outcomes of our study. Although we have anticipated some of the challenges, some surprised us and knowing about them in advance would have made the process much easier.

Although the research experiences are related to Serbia country context, we believe that many lessons could be, with some modifications and additional reflections, used in other contexts as well. Not only to plan the researches better but also to understand the collected data better. Some of these insights could be useful for quantitative studies as well.

¹ Struggling to survive: unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Balkans route (2020), Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub, Save the Children. Retrieved from: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route>



OUR EXPERIENCES - CHILDREN

Although we knew that it is generally complicated to engage children in research or to make child friendly questionnaires on complex topics, one of the most important impressions we had during our data collection was that **it was difficult to achieve a good rapport with unaccompanied children**. Although we expected that it would be hard to motivate children to talk to us and be open and honest about their experiences, we did not expect o many different obstacles concerning children. There were several reasons for this:

The children were most often expecting to leave Serbia relatively fast and this meant that **they had limited time for the interviewers**. It was very hard to plan interviews (their length and coverage) due to unstable children's presence.

For example, in Serbia it was possible to access children in drop-in centers where they stayed for a short period of time during the day, or in institutions for child protection and camps. It was possible to have some control over the interview length in child protection institutions because we would pre schedule interview time and knew that, most of the time, we would find children there. It was harder to do that in camps because children were free to move, and the most uncertain outcomes by far were during interviews in drop-in centers. Children would come in those centers to get initial help after entering the city, to connect with other migrants or find other recourses fast (information, food, internet connection etc.) and their presence was very short and unpredictable.

Even when UASC stayed in the centers long enough for the researches to interview them, this did not automatically mean that they would accept to do it. Their refusal doesn't have to be necessarily related to fear, lack of trust or the fact they do not like the questions/ subject of the study (although it often was). The children's spare time is very precious to them and they rarely have an opportunity to play, communicate/ socialize with their

peers or look for valuable information related to their further travel. **Interviews were not their priority** and, with their situation changing from minute to minute (they get new information about resources being distributed, routes being opened, new smuggling contacts etc.), they would abruptly leave in the middle of interviews. This happened often enough to become a serious problem for data collectors.

This brings us to the next point: **if the interview has been interrupted for any reason there are extremely poor chances that it would be continued later** during the day, or any other day. For this reason, one should prioritize topics and questions. This is especially important if you plan to do any pre-test post-test situations or to make some interventions which you would like to evaluate later on (do action research or anything similar). Usually, not all the information that we ask from respondents is equally important to us so we should have a prepared priority list.

It is very hard to get the information on the same set of questions from all the children - **that can be fully comparable**. Some children will keep silent about certain topics, others will leave before the interview ends (with different children leaving at different points). Children who had truly traumatizing experiences on the route will often accept to do the interview (because they believe they need to do so, because they are frightened, or because adults are asking them to do it etc.) but will keep silent most of the time. Other children will simply have a need to talk about things which are important to them and will skip the questions which are not. If you balance the sample well and have enough interviews, it will not be a problem to have a full picture about a phenomenon you are researching, but if you do not have enough respondents or you need to collect fully comparable data then it can be challenging.

Acquiring trust is a major issue and it is very hard to encourage UASC to open up about topics they consider sensitive. The children are in a foreign land, talking to adults they do not know and whose intentions they do not fully understand. They are not sure if giving some information could put them in a more difficult situation than they're already in. Some of them already had problems and dangerous experiences with adults during their journey. However pleasant and experienced the interviewers are, to children they are still strangers in a very dangerous and unfamiliar surrounding. It would be excellent if the interviewers could have a chance to get to know children before interviews take place.

Some of the best data was collected by the facilitators who knew the children prior to the data collection. They worked with them in the camps for several weeks prior to the interviews and established a certain trust base. This was the reason we selected a few field workers to help us with some of the interviews and trained them specially for that assignment.

UASC children are a vulnerable category even when they seem strong. The boys especially try to appear courageous and stronger than they are in part because of the social pressure to conform to their gender role. Our experience shows that **there are topics that will be emotionally challenging for almost all children** and if the researchers can anticipate them - those topics should go to the end of the questionnaire/ guidelines. If not, there is a risk of adverse reaction and the interview might need to be stopped. Also, it should be noted that, because of their previous experiences on the route, it might happen that children react very emotionally even to the topics that we could not anticipate such a reaction to. This was a reason why several interviews were stopped before we asked all the questions we needed, so one should calculate this possibility in your sample planning.

Previous interview experiences will shape children's expectations of the interaction they have with researchers. The further away the children are from their native country, the greater the chance that somebody already interviewed those children - about different topics but also about the same ones you are asking them. Sometimes they even refuse to do the interviews because of the bad interviewing experiences they had before. Other times they have unrealistic expectations from interviewers in the terms of emotional support, access to information or material gain. Also, it is not uncommon that children find answering the questions that they have already talked about with someone else boring and unattractive and refuse to be the part of the research because of that.

Some children had previous experiences with other researchers, and they also had a range of experiences with authorities and generally adults on the route. Many

of them experienced incidents, including violence, **and they are not sure which type of information they can safely share with you.** They know that there are legal issues they do not fully understand but are aware that some information sharing could be problematic for them, and they spoke about pressures from smugglers not to talk to strangers, sometimes even the pressure from their families. This makes them confused and it is highly important to let them know in advance what exactly the researchers would like to find out, why and what type of potentially sensitive information the researchers would not be interested in. Also, it is important to let them know who is going to have access to the interviews and what will be done to protect their identity. This has proven to improve the rapport with children.

For example, as a part of our research, we had a set of questions concerning children's relationship with smugglers and we knew that these questions will be sensitive. Before this section started, we told the children that we will talk to them about people who helped them pass borders, but that we were not interested in their identities or any specificities that could reveal information about their identities. We highlighted that we were interested in general information such as: how they treat children, are they helpful or harsh, what kind of communication they had with them, whether they were local or from their own country etc. It was important to us that children knew all time what are the next topics, how detailed the answers should be, that we were not interested in information which could jeopardize them, and that they could stop the interview at any time.

Although many researchers working with children know this, it does not hurt to mention that having children as respondents, whether they are UASC or not, is additionally complicated because of **children's limited capacity to concentrate on a task for an extended period of time.** After roughly half an hour of interviewing (depending on the age of the child), the data obtained becomes less useful. After that period, many children start asking when the interview would end, they start giving automatic responses without thinking carefully about them, or only answer questions with yes or no etc. Having a break was not that helpful because it only distanced children from the interview. Where possible, the interviews should be as short as possible (up to 30 minutes) and the researchers should be aware about the priority topics. Also, it is very helpful to use introductions to different topics as "refreshers". Not only the children by themselves get distracted easily, **unaccompanied and separated children sometimes get distracted by other refugees and migrants in drop-in centers.** If possible, the researchers should not conduct interviews in sight of other refugees and migrants. Some of them (other children as well) might work for smugglers and sometimes there is a peer pressure from their group not to talk to strangers. The children do not act the same when other refugees and migrants are around. They talk

more carefully about most topics when other migrants are close, they keep their voice down, completely change their statements when third persons could hear them etc. This is an argument against focus group discussions with this specific population when there are sensitive subjects in the questionnaire/ guidelines.

At the start of our data collection we used a building next to the drop-in center to conduct interviews Almost every time we talked to some of the younger boys (under 15), one of the older boys would approach the windows, knock and wave to the boy being interviewed - sometimes putting his finger in front of his mouth (showing the interviewee to be quiet) sometimes just smiling. The boys being interviewed would visibly change their attitude after that – they would close down and it would usually take a lot of the time to relax them again. We also had a situation in which, after the interview has been finished, other boys made a row from both sides of the corridor looking at the interviewed boy, shouting at him as he passed.

When we tried to find another location for the interviews, it became clear **how hard it was to find proper interviewing conditions in the camps.** This is something one should think about before the interviews take place. The good conditions affect various aspects of interview quality - if you are recording interviews you will not be able to hear the respondents during playback if there is noise or some other distraction. Children might be nervous, or the interview will get interrupted often. Camps and drop-in centers are rarely spaces designed specifically for housing people - these are usually some old buildings (factories, schools, abandoned work spaces etc.) temporarily used for this purpose and there is rarely any intimate space even for its users let alone researchers. Most of the time the only adequate spaces might be offices usually belonging to the authorities. The use of the offices would require a formal request in advance.

The children usually do not know much about their rights (see the results of our research). This could be a problem if you make presumptions before the interview starts. You should clearly express what you expect from the children, but also always explain their rights in this situation and your obligations as an adult. They should also be told, very clearly, that there will be no consequences if they refuse to answer any question or they decide to stop the interview. They should also understand who will use their information and for which purpose.

For us, the “unconventional” child friendly data collection methods were not an option during this research. By unconventional I mean any data collection which goes beyond simply asking children questions about topics of interest (e.g. using drawings, narrative analysis, role playing etc.). Although we use a variety of approaches when trying to collect data from children (feedback about our work, about their needs, consultations during PSS activities etc.), for this study **we opted for traditional interviews.** First of all, most of our respondents were adolescents who are articulated enough to verbally share their experiences on different topics through simple interviewing. Also, our experience with the unaccompanied and separated children unambiguously showed that they prefer being treated “as adults” while sharing experiences from their travel (without using role play, making drawings etc.). Additionally, from our experience, most of other child friendly methods which are more suitable for younger children consume a lot of time which researchers usually do not have with children in fast transit.



OUR EXPERIENCES - THE AUTHORITIES

Although children respondents are the most important subjects of the research and circumstances surrounding their participation have the greatest influence on the study outcomes, there are other participants to be taken into account. No research on children, especially refugee and migrant children travelling alone, should be done without the participation of the relevant official institutions.

The role of the official institution representing children is very important. Their presence is needed and interactions with them can complicate or simplify data collection/ project completion to a great extent.

In order to talk to UASC, at least in Serbia, the children and the representatives of the official institutions (the relevant Ministries or social protection centers), including their legal guardians, need to give their consent. In the case of UASC, the consent from legal guardians **to be able to talk with children is not easy to obtain.** Even when the authorities agree to let children participate in the study, it takes certain time for them to provide formal consent for each child so this time should be calculated while planning the study.

When it comes to our research experiences, it took us much more time than we planned to persuade the Government authorities to help us contact children under their watch as well as to find suitable interview candidates which were under their protection. This significantly influenced our fieldwork schedule.

There is sometimes a delay in the appointment of legal guardians for unaccompanied and separated children (although they should have the guardian as soon as possible) so those children are not available for interviews until they are under guardianship (and this can sometimes last several weeks). There are disproportionately more children than legal guardians

so the officials hesitate to make an estimate whether a certain child can participate in the study because they simply did not have time to make a proper assessment of their wards.

Sometimes **the representatives of authority might dislike the research topic** or have some other permanent or temporary policies on third persons contacting UASC. These rules should be researched before the fieldwork start.

Researchers should always have in mind all relevant ethical considerations when doing research with children (including Save the Children Child Safeguarding standards), and they should **study the official regulations in its country** before approaching unaccompanied and separated minors.

From our experience in the Serbian context, oral consent and caregiver's presence at the interviews is not enough - you need to get the written consents for each child.

Caregivers need to be present during the interviews with the minors. Because of this, there will be a minimum of 3 adult persons at the interviews (interviewer, translator - unless interviewer knows the language spoken by children; and a caregiver) and this has often proven overwhelming to children. It is difficult to establish a trust with children even with only one person in the room, and 3 or 4 adults might be an obstacle. In our experience, other representatives of the authorities asked to be present during the interviewing process, these types of requests should be carefully considered including whether this is something that would be acceptable to children or would benefit the data collection - from our experience, the answer is most often no to both questions.

During an interview government official insisted on being present resulting in more than 5 adults interviewing one child. This situation was visibly not an acceptable interviewing context for the child and we ended up excluding this interview from the final results. We also had to negotiate interview arrangements without too many adults with the risk of not being allowed to continue the research if representatives of official institutions refused our conditions. It is very important to make advance arrangements with the authorities on who will be present during the interviews and what their role might be.

Interviewer should ideally be the only person asking children questions. Caregivers can interfere at some point, especially in order to protect their wards, but if they frequently ask questions of their own or if translators do so as well, this could confuse children, you could lose control over the planned interview structure and lose precious time. The child will not be sure who is interviewing her/ him and for what reason. We had a situation when representatives of the official authorities tried to interfere during the interview process in spite of the previous arrangement that they would only monitor the process in order to protect the children. They've asked questions, diverted conversation in unwanted

direction, criticized children, commented on children's answers etc.

The role of other actors during the interviews is something that should be firmly established before the data collection starts and should be respected until the end of the process.

If researchers talk to the children, who are staying in the same centre for a while or who are applying for asylum, you should be aware that they could have different reasons to agree to talk to you than those kids who intend to leave the country as soon as possible. This is especially visible when the official caregivers are present during the interview, in which case they model their responses to what they believe the officials expect to hear. Also, at least in our case, there was a justified suspicion that the kids staying longer were different in terms of some socio-economic characteristics than those that did not intend to stay longer in a transit country such as Serbia (they often had less money, have lost contact with smugglers, family couldn't support the rest of the journey etc.) so you should take these factors into account in terms of data analysis.



OTHER GENERAL EXPERIENCES

It is difficult to meet quotas. Many things must come together in order to include all of the desired categories in the research done with populations in transit. Unless there is a great number of children present in one place (in a refugee and migrant center for example) it would be advantageous to plan a longer period of time to do the interviews - children in transit often come in waves/groups and are not necessarily representative of the whole “population” for your country, so doing interviews in a short period of time could cover only children of certain ethnicity and age with no real respondent diversity.

It is very hard to detect single UASC girls, especially the ones willing to be interviewed. In the Balkans context, the girls usually travel with other people they denote as their family or spouses in order to protect themselves and to hide their UASC status. The cultural expectations also play a big role in the girls’ openness to interviews and those coming from very traditional or religious societies do not believe it would be right for women to talk to strangers. The girls should be interviewed by women only, wherever possible, and it would be desirable to have women cultural mediators/translators as well: the girls are simply less comfortable talking about their experiences when men are around.

Language is a major obstacle when it comes to data collection. The children rarely know English. In the Serbia context, Pakistani kids and older adolescents from Iran who learned it at school knew English well enough, but children from Afghanistan and other countries included in our research often did not. From our experience, interviews done in English are, expectedly, not as rich and detailed as those done in children’s native languages. Even when some children say they know English well or that they speak some other non-native language - they usually cannot express themselves well enough for researchers to collect good quality data out

of those interviews. It is easy to accept to talk to them in English (or other non- native language) especially if you do not have a translator at hand but the quality of the interviews is always noticeably poorer.

We have a diverse population of UASC in Serbia so we needed interpreters speaking Arabic, Pashtu, Urdu and different variants of Persian. In the Balkans context it was hard to find people covering all those languages at once. The best interpreters in Serbia were not at researchers’ disposal most of the time (they were shared by several organizations and authorities so they had limited time for other activities). Interviews should be planned having in mind the availability of interpreters, and how does this dictate the fieldwork tempo. The interpreters need to be more engaged than just interpreting - they should act as cultural mediators and help with explaining things from the adequate cultural perspective. However, they should avoid providing their interpretation of the answers so careful preparation, training of the mediators and asking respondents and mediators additional checking questions if needed.

Age assessment - children sometimes hide their real age due to many factors: to protect themselves, get the support that they need (the support available only to a certain age group), or to fit into certain legal categories that could help them with asylum claims or help them be accommodated in a more secure places or help them stay with their group etc. **It is difficult to be sure about respondents age.** Where there is a reasonable doubt that you are not talking to an underage person than you should exclude those interviews from the final analysis (or at least mention the uncertainty about the age of respondents). When a child could be younger than he or she claims (we had such cases as well), the inclusion of the interview will depend on age categories that are relevant to your research topic.

Researchers need to be very sensitive to possible ethical dilemmas during the research and monitor

children's emotional state at every point of interview. It looks like stating the obvious but it is not. Many kids, especially girls, are trafficking victims, they had experienced violence or could have an emotional breakdown when asked about their experiences. We, on our part, haven't done any interviews with any child to whom we could not give full and adequate psychosocial support after the interview, or refer them to it. It is easy to ignore child's discomfort during the interview, but our first responsibility is to protect children and not collect the data, and the interview should be stopped if in a dilemma.

For example, although we were very interested to understand experiences UASC girls had during their journey, we have stopped all the interviews in which we assessed there could be emotional consequences for the girls interviewed. It turned out that this decision meant that we did not have any data from the girls.

Interviewers (if the researcher is not doing all the interviews by himself) need to have experience working with refugee and migrant children (or at least conducting research with children). They should always attend a training that will raise awareness about child specific topics but also CSG standards and priorities for the research. They should also understand what to do in case the interview problems occur.

We opted to engage our field workers to do some interviews, with the researcher's supervision. This decision was made after realizing that the priority was to create an atmosphere of trust in order to help children be open about their experiences, and that it would be much better for children to engage in conversation with someone they already knew. We have conducted a formal training for interviewers, discussing and piloting not only interviews but also emphasizing ethical considerations, child safeguarding, etc. For us this was a good decision.

The thank you gifts were well received by children, but they were not necessary. From our experience, the children who were interested to participate in the interviews showed genuine interest to share their experiences and communicate their thoughts and feelings. Small tokens of appreciation made children very emotional and grateful, and they received them only after the interviews (regardless of the result). Only in one case the interviewer, by mistake, gave the gift before the interview and the child asked us if it was OK for them to stop the interview although they got the present. These small thank you gifts should be given at the end in order not to oblige the children to proceed with something they do not want to or make them believe they should tell us something we would like to hear.



CONCLUSION

Researching refugee and migrant children in transit context is a complex process and there is no one recipe for doing it. Although we started from the clear research structure and design, the decisions that finally shaped the process and outputs were, to a great extent, made as a result of different everyday challenges and influences – some expected some not. This “organic” development of research design was tolerable since we could maintain focus on the main idea, original research questions and clear methodological rules to the very end. We tried to collect data in such way that the data could be, as much as possible, relevant for the whole targeted population (although we conducted a qualitative research) and useful to humanitarian workers and other researchers.

This research was designed with clear intention to help us understand these children and their experiences in order to improve their status in transit countries. When faced with difficulties we were, first of all, guided by the principles of children’s wellbeing, our ethical standards and research logic. Our experiences proved once again that flexibility and proper advance logistical planning are essential for any successful migration research.



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