

Navigating Multiple Challenges in a Complex Environment:

Key practice messages from research with unaccompanied refugee children & young people

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Associate Professor Muireann Ní Raghallaigh, School of Social Policy, Social Work
and Social Justice, University College Dublin

Muireann.niraghallaigh@ucd.ie

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Focus of Presentation

Outline the **complexity of the lives of unaccompanied refugee children** - impacted by past and present experiences and uncertainty about the future.

Discuss how this complexity is exacerbated by the **complex global and national context** in contemporary society.

Highlight the **critical importance of social work and social care** in addressing this complexity.

Terminology

UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) – definition of ‘refugee’

Asylum seekers/international protection applicants
individuals seeking to be *recognised* as refugees and granted protection

Unaccompanied Refugee Children / Separated Children
Seeking International Protection/ Unaccompanied minors

Under 18

Outside their country of origin, separated from legal or customary care givers

Seeking / sought international protection.

The Complex Lives of Unaccompanied Refugee Children & Young People



Pre migration
experiences

Experiences
of flight

Experiences in
transit

Post
migration
experiences

*NB: Importance of recognising the 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' experiences
(Kohli, 2004)*

Challenges Facing Unaccompanied Children and Young People

Challenges facing unaccompanied young people as they navigate life in Ireland:

- **Being alone:** Managing the myriad of challenges without family support and in a context where they may struggle to trust.
- **Expectations:** Some bear the burden of expectations of their family – financial & family reunification expectations – while knowing their families are at risk.
- **Navigating complex systems:** dealing with the stresses of the international protection system **and** the care system
- **Disbelief/Suspicion:** Some whose ages are ‘disputed’ and not accepted to be children
- **Transition to adulthood:** Particular challenges as they age out of care
- **Family reunification:** Challenges navigating the family reunification system and challenges when reunification occurs
- **At Risk:** Risk of trafficking, given their (potential) vulnerability

Regarding Ageing Out of Care:

“Nobody will come to you, even if you're sick, nobody will come to your room to ask you are you OK. **Even if they didn't see you for the whole day, nobody cares.**”

(Young person who moved from Direct Provision to Foster Care, in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)

Regarding Being Alone:

"I came here alone, and I'm happy but I am alone. But one day I know I will see my mum and my sister"

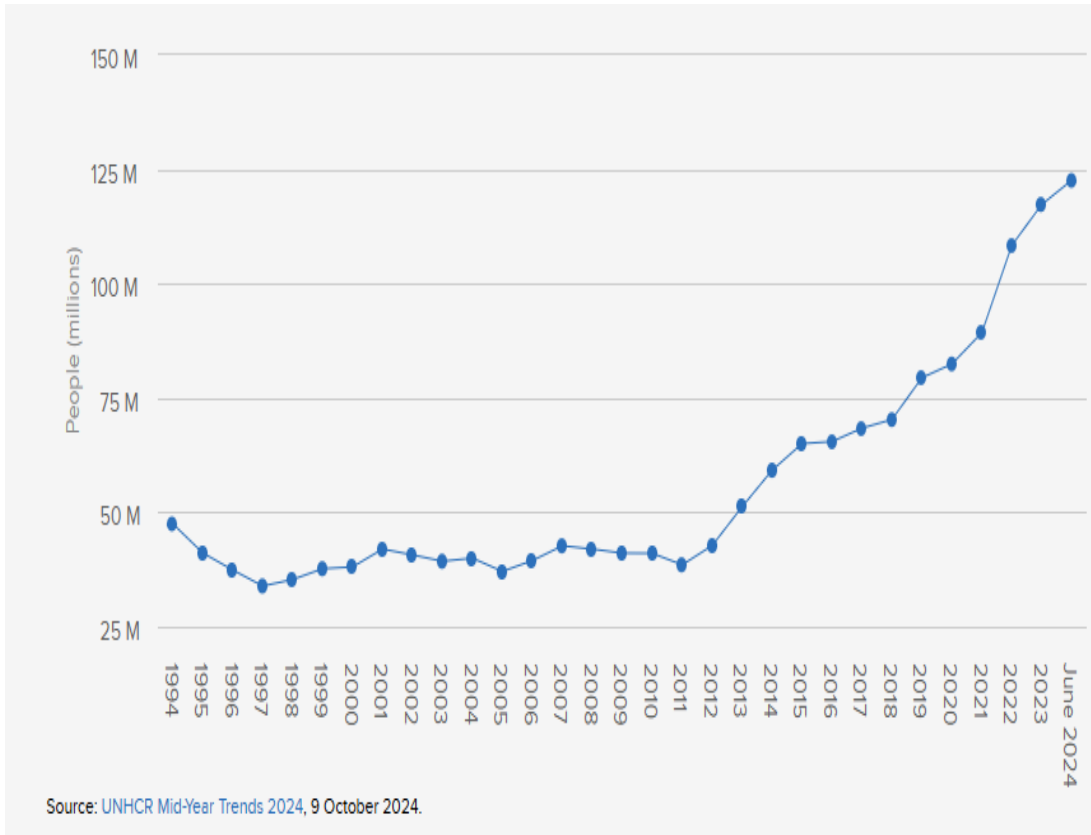
(Female, 18, cited in Life Through my Lens 2024)

Regarding Reunification:

"... they have become independent, become individuals, but they still want to be cared for...And so, you know, **waiting for their parents to come and care for them and then realizing they are the carers.**"

(Professional, cited in Smith, Ní Raghallaigh & Johnson, 2025)

Complex Times: the Global Context



Global context, which includes:

- Increased numbers of refugees and other forcibly displaced people at a global level (see UNHCR, 2024).
- Climate change
- Increased polarisation of viewpoints
- Increased securitisation of migration
- Diversity and inclusion initiatives under threat

*UNHCR stats: under 50m displaced persons in 1994;
122.6 million displaced persons in June 2024*

Complex Times: The Context on the Island of Ireland



Marchers in Dublin unfurl the welcome banner for people seeking sanctuary for war and violence in the Middle East. (Photo: Sam Boal/The Journal)



Context in Ireland:

- Rising rates of homelessness and precarity in housing
- Increased cost of living
- Rise in anti-refugee sentiment and racism
- Growing crisis in services for people with disabilities and mental health difficulties
- State and NGO social care services under increasing pressure.

Image source: <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2015/09/12/across-europe-tens-thousands-rally-welcome-refugees>
<https://thecollegeview.ie/2023/01/18/anti-refugee-protests-reject-far-right-ties/>

Regarding Racism:

*“My school is very good and the teachers nice with me, but, **there’s some people in school they are being racist..... about Syrian people, or their religion**”.*

(Young Person, cited in Robertson, 2020)

What impact does the complex context
(globally and within Ireland) have for
unaccompanied young people?

Complex Lives + Complex times = ?

- **Polarisation of viewpoints:** Children & young people now subjected to regular protests and anti-refugee sentiment that were unusual previously in Ireland
- **Increased numbers & housing shortage has resulted in pressure on the state care systems**
 - Increased likelihood of moving between care placements – lack of consistency – considerable implications for building trust
 - Potential reduction in care standards: Tusla using ‘special emergency arrangements’: care is less likely to meet the standards that are expected.

Complex Lives + Complex times = ?

- Insufficient amount of housing – both generally and for adult international protection applicants specifically - has implications for unaccompanied refugee children too.
- Age disputes & implications of these: 'age-disputed minors' at risk being accommodated in 'emergency' centres, or of not being accommodated at all. In addition, they have more limited family reunification rights
- Risk of cycles of homelessness: particularly for 'age disputed' young people, for those leaving the care system & for reunified families.
- **Pressure on mental health, disability and social care services generally:**
 - Limited mental health and psychosocial supports available for all: refugees may be disproportionately impacted.
 - Potential unseen vulnerability of older teenage boys / young men – the system likely to 'vulnerabilise' them in these circumstances

What role can Social Workers and Social Care workers play? - 1

Remarkable **resilience** of many refugees despite these adversities. But we need services and systems that support their lives in Ireland, rather than systems that have the potential to (further) 'vulnerabilise' them. To achieve this, we need:

Individualised, relationship-based practice:

- Need to individualise people of refugee background & and prioritise relationships in practice

Need to also move beyond the individual....

What role can Social Workers and Social Care workers play? - 2

Deindividualised, macro level practice:

- Need to advocate for and plan systems and services that consider not only the young people at *this* point in time, but also take their past and future into account (e.g. when they turn 18, when family arrive)
- Need to advocate for housing for all & for services for adult asylum seekers that recognise their potential vulnerability

To counter anti-refugee sentiment, polarised views and racism:

- Need to adopt an intersectional lens and bring different marginalised groups together
- Need to ensure social workers and social care workers engage in ongoing anti-racism training
- Need to speak up – be brave

To conclude:

“They brought me to their daughter's wedding, so they said the family has to go to a wedding so you're part of our family so you have to come with us ... so basically, you know, they count me as their family, so I felt like you know I'm part of this family.

(Young person cited in Sirriyeh & Ní Raghallaigh, 2018)

“With my social worker I feel like, I just draw half-way, they gave me hope... **In my life trusting is hard to me, so the way how they trust me**, ... they make me like to have a big heart, because they give me value... Now I have a big heart and I have hope... I have aim....”

(Young person cited in UK research by Larkin and Lefevre, 2020)

Thank you!

Go Raibh Maith Agaibh!

Contact: Muireann.niraghallaigh@ucd.ie

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/muireannnir/>

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