

CHILDMOVE - The impact of flight experiences on the psychological wellbeing of unaccompanied refugee minors

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1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Worldwide, about 30 million children are currently forcibly displaced, of which a considerable group is separated from their parent(s) or caregiver(s), “unaccompanied refugee minors” (URM). Forced migration is known to considerably impact URMs’ psychological wellbeing, leading to **elevated levels of emotional problems**. **Both difficult experiences** in URMs’ **countries of origin** and **post-migration stressors**, such as daily material (limited housing facilities) and social stressors (e.g., limited social network, racism), and inadequate professional support impact their wellbeing. Yet, little is known about the longitudinal psychological impact of URMs’ transit experiences, during the flight.

The objective of this study is therefore to increase the knowledge about the impact of experiences occurring during the flight on the psychological wellbeing of URMs, in relation to the impact of past traumatic experiences in the home country and to daily material and social stressors in the host country.

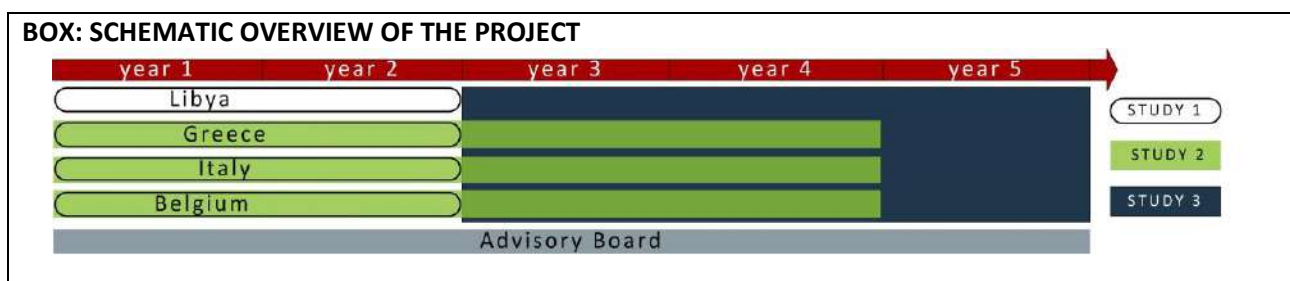
The research pursues following **objectives**:

- ⇒ **Increase knowledge about the impact of experiences occurring during the flight on the psychological wellbeing of URMs**, in relation to the impact of past traumatic experiences in the home country and to daily material and social stressors in the host country.
- ⇒ Provide unique **insights in the diversity of and evolutions in their experiences while fleeing from home**, and the evolutions in their wellbeing.
- ⇒ Identify the risk factors impacting URMs’ mental **health longitudinally**, hereby questioning the classical differentiation between ‘daily stressors’ and ‘trauma’, possibly evolving towards an elaborated theoretical and empirically validated concept of ‘**cumulative trauma**’.
- ⇒ **Create ground-breaking avenues to study a group that is difficult to reach and follow**, owing to the methodological approach.

2. METHODS

This project uses a highly innovative methodology, through **combining different approaches in a mixed-methods and multi-sited, cross-country and longitudinal design**.

The project is made up of three interlinked studies starting from four different countries: Libya, Greece, and Italy as key transit countries and main countries of entry in the European Union, and Belgium as an example of a settlement country for URMs. In each of the countries, different settings will be selected to carry out the research.



STUDY 1: An in-depth, mixed-methods study in each study country



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European Research Council ‘Starting Grants’ fund early-career scientists who independently carry out ground-breaking and risk-taking research projects with both scientific and practical focuses.

(1) Participant observations will form the framework to contextualize the data collected with the other research methods.

(2) A visual ethnography of building/reception facilities' composition and the analysis of **written 'graffiti' inscriptions** that refugees have made on walls, tables and doors will be photographed, translated and thematically analysed. It is assumed that the messages left by refugees reveal extremely valuable information about their experiences and feelings, without any restriction of expression.

(3) Interviews with URMs: Interviews and self-reported questionnaires will be completed by almost URMs over 14 years of age in each of the four countries, purposively sampled (age, nationality and gender, total n=294). Participating URMs will be selected either directly by the researchers or in close collaboration with social workers from the involved facilities. In both cases, each participant will receive extensive information about the research and an informed consent with all information, including the researcher's contact details and information about a local referral network, if needed. All ethical guidelines will be followed strictly. Confidentiality and anonymity of all children's personal data will be ensured. **In-depth interviews** will be carried out with the participating URMs, in presence of an interpreter, if needed, complemented with **visualizing methods** (i.e., lifelines) and **self-report thematic questionnaires** on wellbeing and mental health, experienced stressors, coping strategies and social support. In Greece, Italy and Belgium, the interviewed URMs will be asked to take part in study 2, the longitudinal follow-up, and contact details will be exchanged.

STUDY 2: A longitudinal, cross-country follow-up study of URMs

The groups selected in Greece, Italy and Belgium will be followed-up, even when travelling to other countries, for a period of 18 to 24 months. At six-months intervals (3 measurement moments per participant), the participant will be interviewed again, including the completion of the self-report questionnaires (cf. study 1), in presence of an interpreter, if necessary. Distance follow-up with adjusted communication tools (via email, Facebook and phone cards given to the participants) will be conducted in between meetings in order to keep attrition as low as possible. Ethical guidelines will be followed scrupulously during this follow-up study.

STUDY 3: Integration and theoretical advancement

(1) Compilation of the data collected in this study with other earlier related studies: Integration and analysis of all the data gathered in the different studies and countries through focusing on particular themes (e.g., trafficking, racism, social support, coping strategies, impact of care structures in transit and settlement countries) and aggregation of these data with other earlier studies focusing on the same themes.

(2) Discussion of the results from the first phases with the advisory board of academics, with European policy makers, practitioners and stakeholders, and with the local advisory boards of practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholders built up in each selected country to discuss the study findings and its implications and recommendations.

3. SOCIETAL RELEVANCE TO POLICY MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

- ⇒ Development of **relevant research tools to address the psychosocial needs of a group that is difficult to reach and follow**, owing to the methodological approach.
- ⇒ **Document the diversity of and evolutions in migratory experiences of unaccompanied minors while fleeing from home**, and the potential **risk factors** encountered during their journeys.
- ⇒ Identification of the **risk factors impacting URMs' mental health** longitudinally, and **following the evolutions in their wellbeing**.
- ⇒ Document the way in which **care and reception structures for unaccompanied minors in both transit and settlement countries can contribute to reducing the mental health impact** of the flight experiences.
- ⇒ Establishment of a **referral network of practitioners in European countries crossed by minors** during their migratory journeys.
- ⇒ Formulation of **insights for policy makers and practitioners** in clinical, educational and social work settings and for interventions for victims of multiple trauma.
- ⇒ **Implementation of two workshops** by Ilse Derluyn, the Scientific Coordinator, also expert in policy-implementation with policy makers and practitioners to discuss the implications of the studies for policy and practice. Key actors from diverse countries, institutions and organizations will be invited.

This document is a summary of the ChildMove research project.

For more information, please send your request to: childmove@ugent.be or ilse.derluyn@ugent.be