

Child migrants: Irregular entry and asylum

The number of migrant children has been rising globally since the turn of the century. According to estimates by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in 2020, 35.5 million children were living outside their country of birth, 11.5 million more than in 2000. Child migration takes many forms, from regular family reunification to forced and traumatic migration. This infographic focuses exclusively on forced and irregular movements of migrant children to the EU.

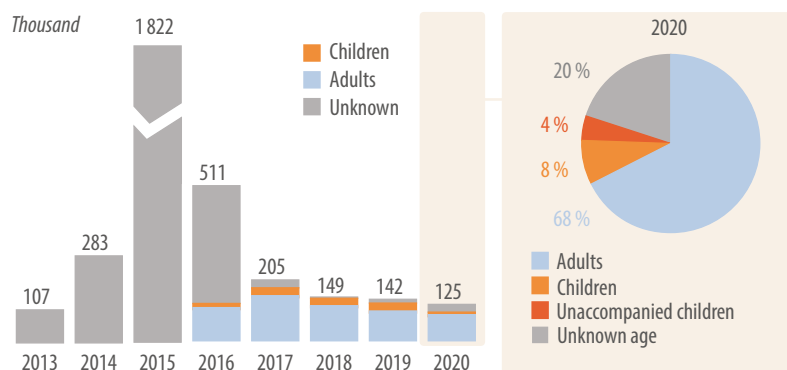
1. Irregular migration

Migrant children are considered irregularly present in the EU Member States if they cross the border irregularly and do not subsequently obtain authorisation to stay, if they are refused entry to EU territory under the [Schengen Border Code](#), or if their authorisation to stay expires without being renewed. There are no accurate data on the number of migrant children irregularly present in the EU Member States. However, some trends can be inferred from data relating to the number of migrant children detected while trying to cross the EU's external borders irregularly and those detected once they are already irregularly present in the EU Member States.

Irregular border crossings

Figure 1 shows that in 2020 more than 15 000 children were detected while crossing the European Union's external borders irregularly, more than 5 000 of them unaccompanied, i.e. they arrived on EU territory unaccompanied by an adult responsible for them. The overall number of children detected crossing the EU's external borders irregularly was significantly lower in 2020 than in previous years, showing the impact of the pandemic on the number of children arriving in the EU, as highlighted by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency ([Frontex](#)).

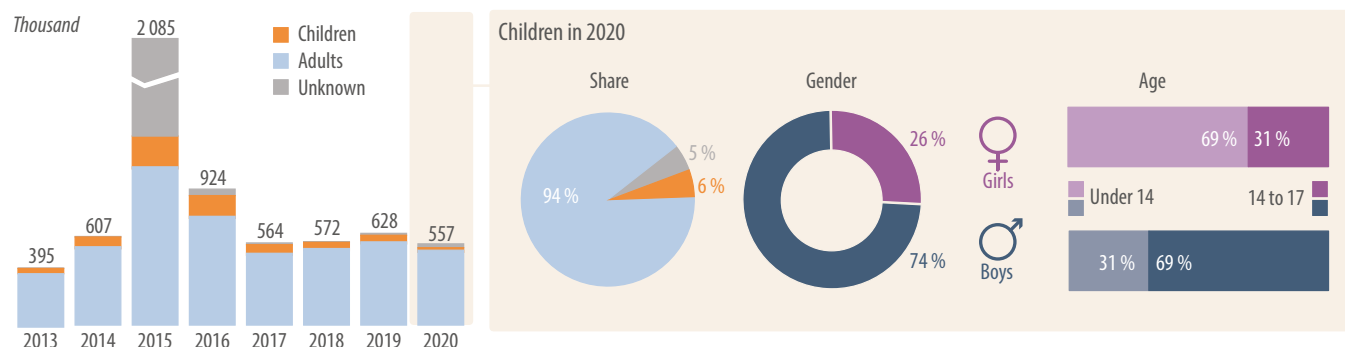
Figure 1 – Irregular EU border crossings



Migrant children irregularly present in the EU

Irregular border crossing often leads to an unauthorised presence in the territory of the Member States. Figure 2 shows the evolution in the number of third-country nationals found to be irregularly present on EU territory since 2013 and the share among them of children. In 2020, children represented 6% of the total number of third-country nationals found to be irregularly present in the EU, with a clear predominance of boys over the age of 14. The overall number of children found to be irregularly present in the EU decreased substantially in 2020 in comparison with previous years, from close to 58 000 children found to be irregularly present in the EU in 2019 to nearly half that number (30 000) in 2020.

Figure 2 – Third-country nationals found to be irregularly present in the EU



The numbers of migrant children found to be irregularly present in the EU are not distributed proportionately among the Member States. In 2020, of the 30 000 children found to be irregularly present throughout the EU, nearly 11 000 were detected in Germany, 6 500 in Greece and 4 500 in France. However, for a better understanding of the uneven distribution among Member States the absolute figures need to be correlated with the population of each Member State. Figure 3 shows the number of children found to be irregularly present in the various Member States per million inhabitants in 2020, with Greece leading the ranking of Member States with the highest numbers of children irregularly present per million inhabitants, followed by Cyprus, Croatia and Austria.

Figure 3 – Migrant children found to be irregularly present per Member State, in 2020



Migrant children returned from the EU

Migrant children irregularly present can be ordered to leave EU territory under the [Return Directive](#), even if they are unaccompanied, under certain conditions, including respect for the best interests of the child. The bar chart below shows that children represented 4 % of the total number of third-country nationals ordered to leave in 2019 and 3 % of the total number of third-country nationals returned from the EU. More than 4 000 children were returned from the EU in 2019, including 2 500 children under 14 years of age, with a clear predominance of boys in relation to girls (65 % of the children returned were boys). It is also noteworthy that the age of a significant proportion of the third-country nationals ordered to leave (16 %) and returned (17 %) from the EU is unknown, so it is impossible to determine if any of them were under the age of 18.

Figure 4 – Children ordered to leave the EU and returned in 2019

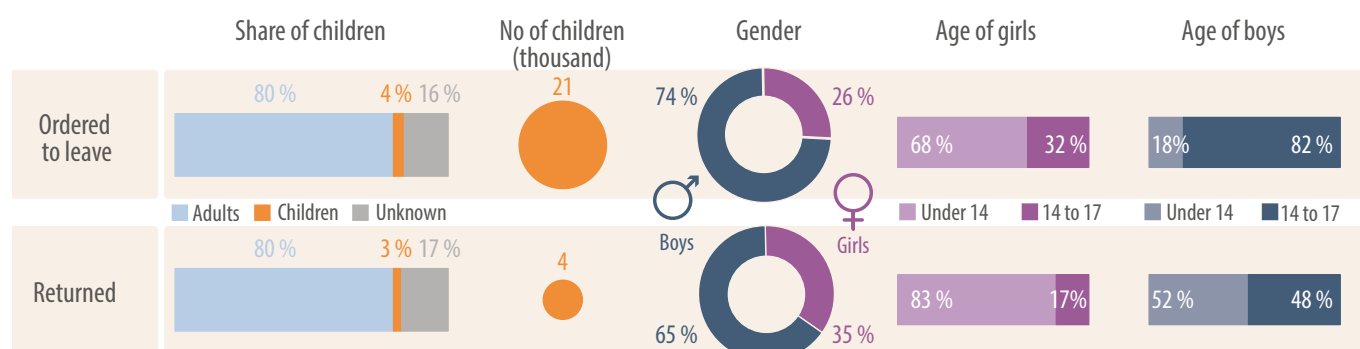
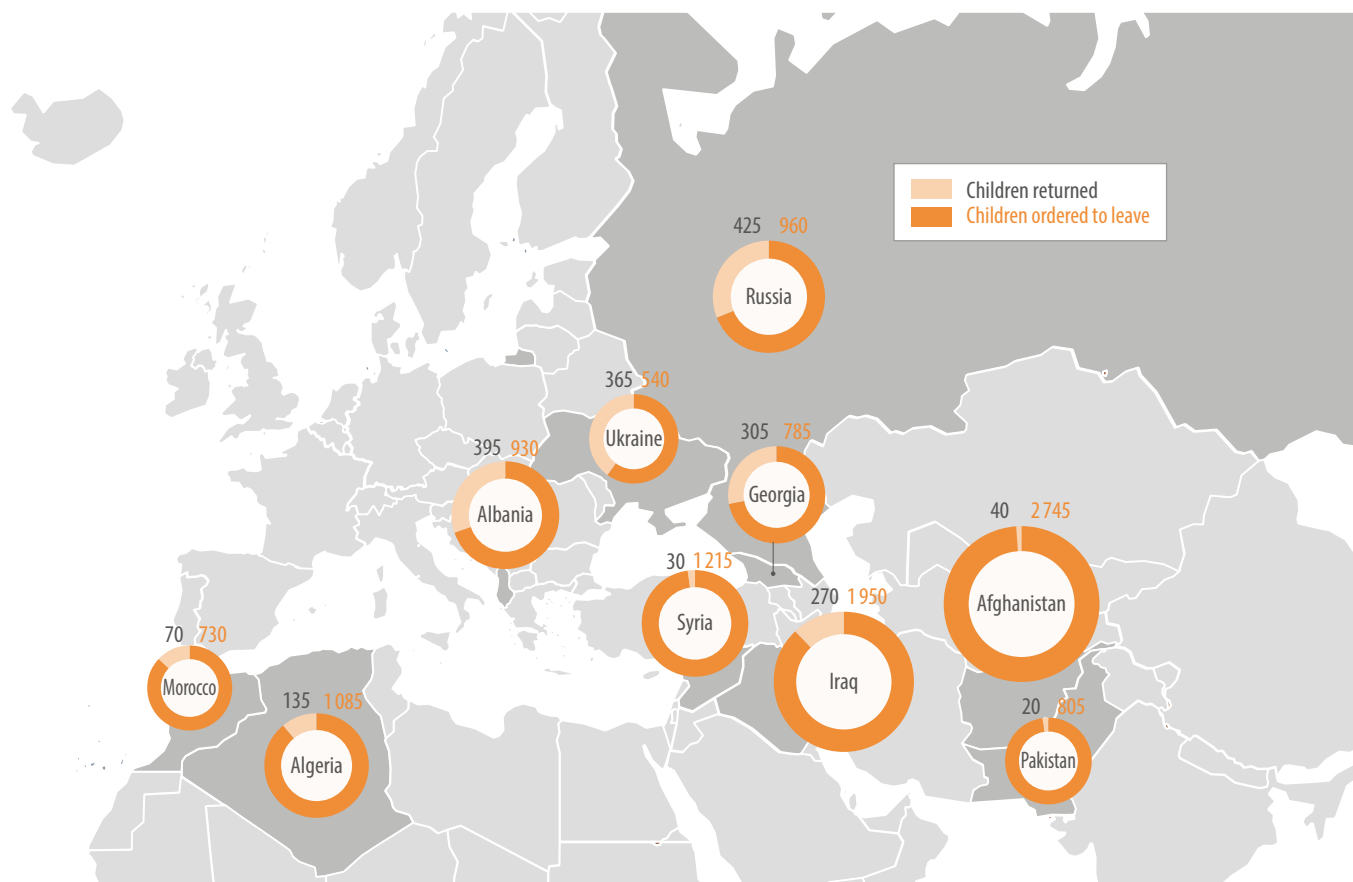


Figure 5 shows the top nationalities of children ordered to leave and/or returned from the EU in 2019. In 2019, the top four countries of origin of children ordered to leave the EU were Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Algeria, whereas the top four countries of origin of children effectively returned from the EU were Russia, Albania, Ukraine and Georgia. These differences suggest a more collaborative approach to return procedures on the part of certain countries of origin, but also the fact that the internal situation in certain countries of origin may prevent the enforcement of return decisions issued against their nationals (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria).

Figure 5 – Top 10 nationalities of children ordered to leave the EU and/or returned in 2019

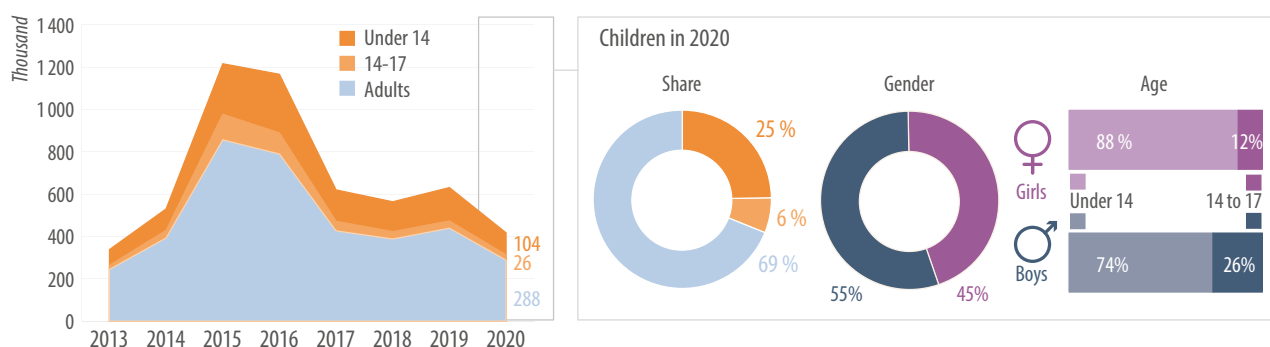


2. Children and international protection

Children are alarmingly over-represented in the number of refugees worldwide. In 2020, 11.8 million children were refugees, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)). Although they represent 30 % of the world's population, children [made up](#) nearly half (46 %) of the world's refugees last year (a total of 26.4 million). Under the EU [Qualification Directive](#), children can apply for international protection as part of a family unit or in their own right if they comply with the requirements to qualify as a refugee or to be granted subsidiary protection. A child can qualify as a refugee if he or she has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group in his or her country of origin (Articles 9-10, EU Qualification Directive), whereas he or she can be eligible for subsidiary protection if he or she does not qualify as a refugee, but would face a real risk of suffering serious harm if returned to his or her country of origin (Article 15, EU Qualification Directive).

Figure 6 shows the number of first time applications for international protection in the EU since 2013, and the share among them lodged by children aged under 14 and under 18. Children represented 31 % of all applicants in the EU in 2020 (i.e. 130 000), although a dramatic reduction in the number of child applicants can be seen from 2019 to 2020 (from 192 000 to 130 000) in line with a general downward trend [explained](#) by the travel restrictions imposed to contain the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 6 – First-time applicants, by age group

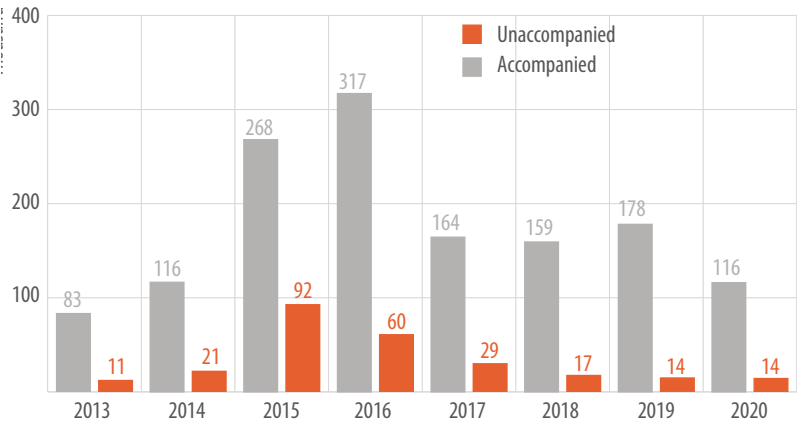


Unaccompanied children

Children arriving on the territory of a Member State unaccompanied by an adult responsible for them, or those left unaccompanied after entering the territory of the Member States, can also apply for international protection under the EU [Asylum Procedure Directive](#). National legislation determines the cases in which they can apply for international protection on their own behalf and those in which they must do so through a representative.

Unaccompanied children represented 10.5% of the total number of children applying for international protection (first-time applications) in the EU Member States in 2020, as shown in Figure 7. The percentage was higher than in 2019 (7.3 %) and 2018 (5%), but far from the figures seen in 2015, when 25.5% of the children applying for international protection in EU Member States were unaccompanied. Most of the unaccompanied children applying for asylum in 2020 were boys (88 %).

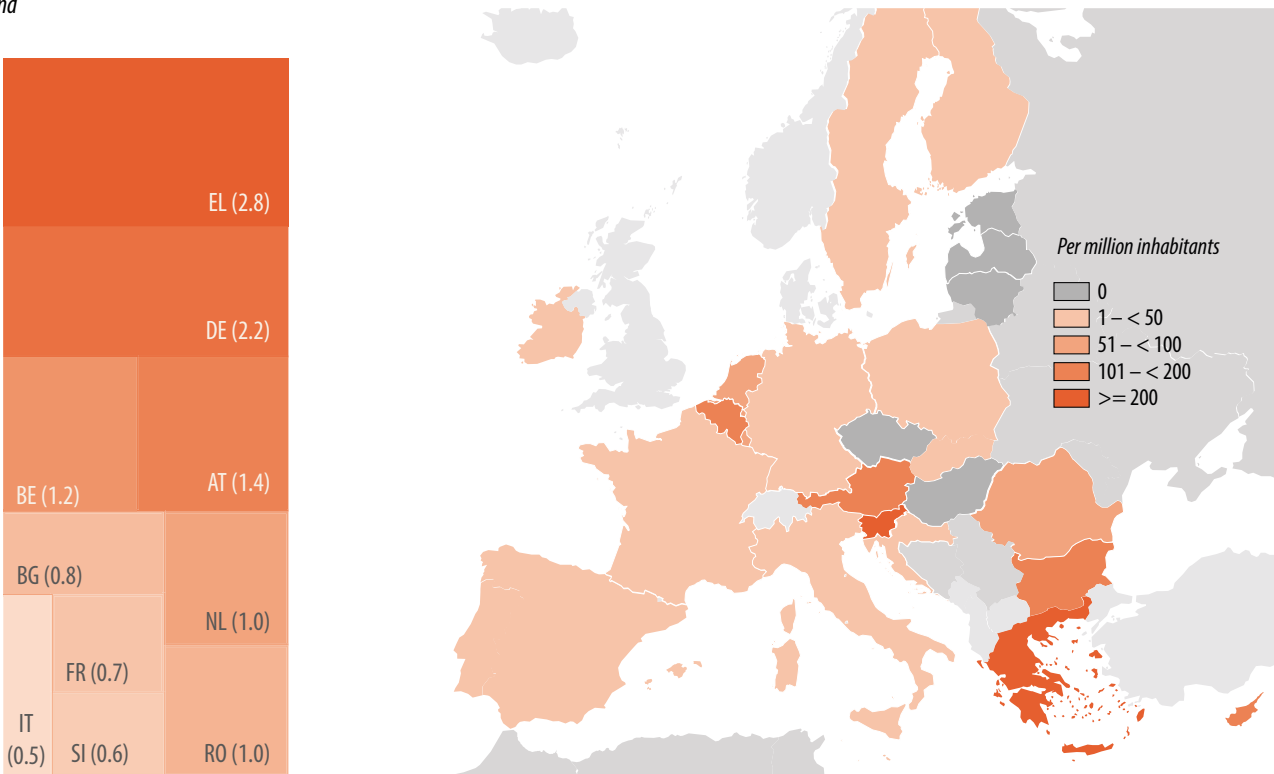
Figure 7 – Unaccompanied children applying for international protection



The overall number of unaccompanied children applying for international protection in EU Member States is distributed unequally among them. Figure 8 shows the total and relative numbers of unaccompanied children applying for international protection in the various Member States in 2020. Greece topped the ranking of EU Member States as regards the absolute number of unaccompanied children applying for international protection in 2020, with 2 800 applicants, followed by Germany (2 200), Austria (1 400) and Belgium (1 200). These four Member States together hosted more than half the total number of unaccompanied children applying for international protection in the EU as a whole. However, the order of this ranking looks different when the numbers are expressed relative to each Member State’s population. In 2020, Slovenia, followed by Greece, Cyprus, Austria, Bulgaria and Belgium, topped the ranking of Member States hosting the most unaccompanied children applying for international protection per million inhabitants.

Figure 8 – Unaccompanied children applying for international protection in 2020, in absolute and relative numbers

Thousand

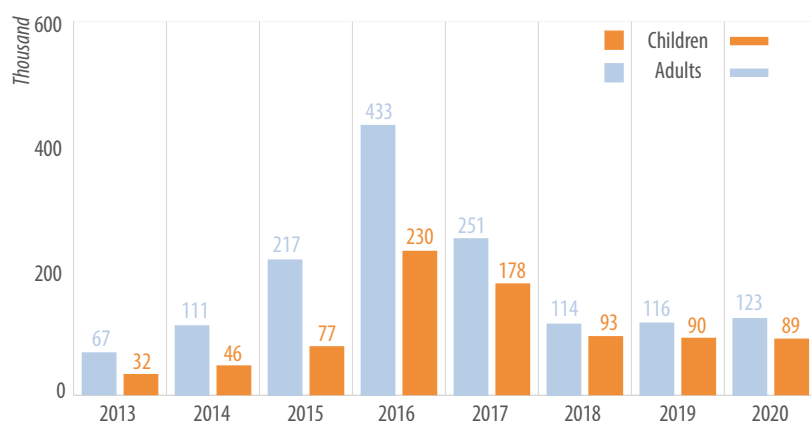


First-instance decisions on applications for international protection

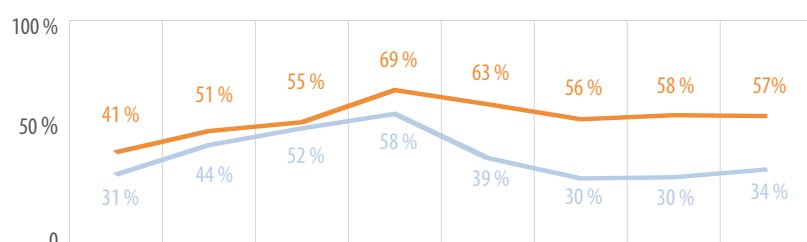
Member States must process applications for international protection in accordance with all the principles and guarantees enshrined in the Asylum Procedures Directive, in particular its Chapters II and III. Once processed, applications for international protection are either granted or rejected, depending on whether the applicant qualifies or not for international protection under the EU Qualification Directive. Applications for international protection may also be declared inadmissible under the conditions enshrined in Article 33 of the Asylum Procedures Directive. Eurostat provides data on positive and negative first instance and final decisions on applications for international protection. First-instance decisions include applications for international protection, authorisations to stay for humanitarian reasons under Member States' national law and decisions granted to persons who are subject to the Dublin Regulation (Council Regulation 604/2013/EC).

Figure 9 shows the total numbers of positive first-instance decisions for international protection for child and adult applicants, as well as the percentages of positive first-instance decisions for child and adult applicants. When examining the percentages of positive first-instance decisions for both groups since 2013, it is clear that child applicants have significantly higher chances of obtaining a positive first-instance decision on their application for international protection than adults. In recent years (since 2017), the trend is even clearer, with success rates at first instance for children at close to 60% and success rates for adults trailing behind at 40%.

Figure 9 – Number of positive first-instance decisions on applications for international protection in the EU



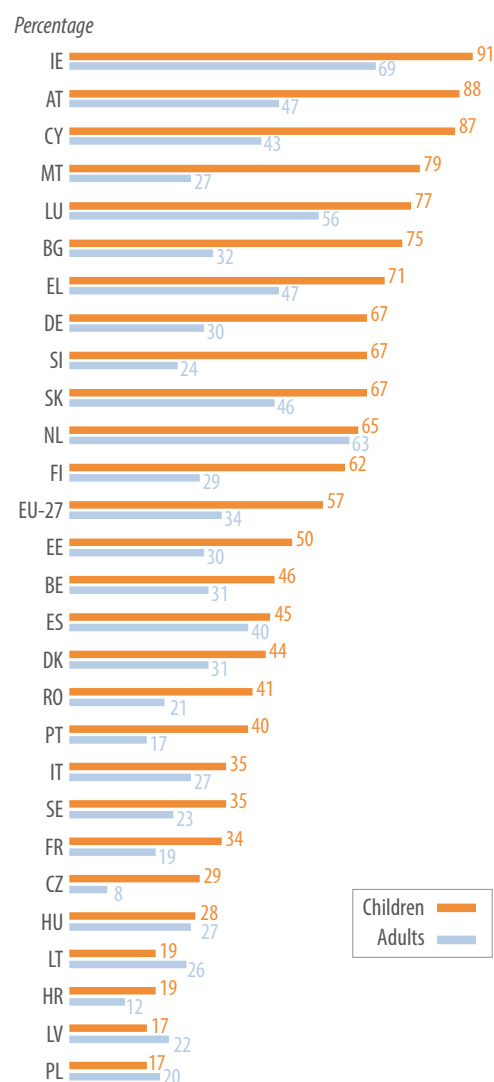
Share of positive decisions as % of all decisions



Gender of children receiving positive decisions in 2020



Figure 10 – Positive first-instance decisions to applications for international protection per Member State (2020)

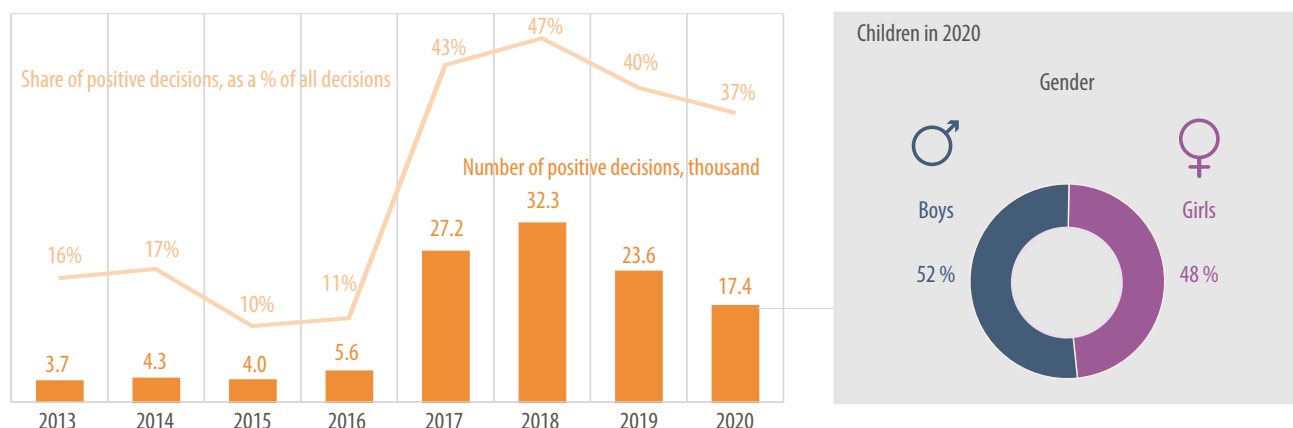


It should be noted however that child applicant success rates at first instance differ widely across the Union, ranging from 69% positive decisions at first instance in Ireland to 17% positive decisions in Poland and Latvia in 2020, as shown in Figure 10. Only in the latter two Member States and Lithuania are success rates higher for adults than for children seeking international protection.

Final decisions on applications for international protection

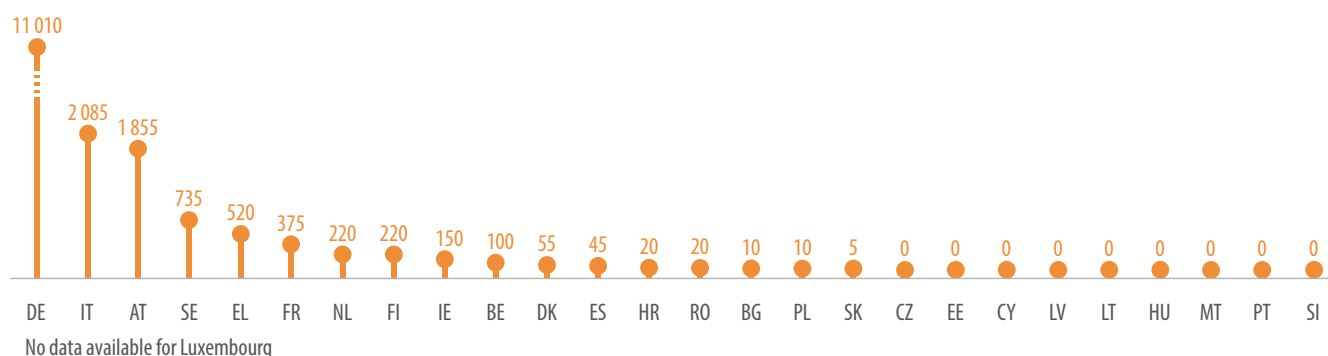
Decisions made on applications for international protection may be appealed before national administrative or judicial authorities as provided for in the Member States' legal orders. However, Article 46 of the EU Asylum Procedure Directive requires Member States to provide applicants for international protection with an effective remedy before a court. Once all internal remedies have been exhausted, a decision on the application is considered final.

Figure 11 – Positive final decisions on appeal or review of children's applications for international protection



The bar chart above shows the number of positive final decisions on applications for international protection lodged by children in the EU Member States, while the line chart reflects the share of positive decisions among all final decisions. By comparing this share with that at first-instance level (see line chart in Figure 9) it can be seen that the chances of children getting a positive final decision are considerably lower than at first-instance level.

Figure 12 – Positive final decisions on children's applications for international protection by Member State in 2020



The uneven distribution of positive final decisions among Member States is illustrated by Figure 12, which also shows that 9 out of 27 Member States did not issue any positive final decisions at all for children in 2020.

Notes

Data sources: Fig1 [Frontex](#); Fig2 Eurostat [migr_eipre](#); Fig3 [migr_eiord](#), [migr_eirtn](#); Fig4 [migr_eiord](#), [migr_eirtn](#); Fig5 [migr_eipre](#); Fig6 [migr_asyappctza](#); Fig7 [migr_asyunaa](#); Fig8 [migr_asyunaa](#); Fig9 [migr_asydcfsta](#); Fig10 [migr_asydcfsta](#); Fig11 [migr_asydcfina](#).

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