

STRENGTHENING REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN'S HEALTH STATUS

IN SOUTHERN AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE



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RM Child-Health

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The 'RM Child-Health' initiative, which began in January 2020, has now provided a full year of vital support for the health and well-being of refugee and migrant (RM) children on the move in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia. With co-funding from the European Union, the €4.3 million, 27-month initiative, under the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety aims to ensure that all refugee and migrant children and their families have access to quality health care and accurate health information. UNICEF Country Offices have led the implementation of the initiative at national level in close consultation with national partners and, very importantly, refugee and migrant communities.

The past year has confirmed that the initiative is well on track to achieve its objectives by the end of its timeframe. For many interventions supported by the initiative, the number of refugee and migrant children and families targeted for support has already been reached or even exceeded.

The achievements of the initiative to date reflect its two-track approach, which combines interventions that target refugee and migrant children and their parents (particularly mothers), as well as national authorities, health practitioners and other frontline workers.

Why is this initiative needed?

The health and wellbeing of refugee and migrant children and families in Europe is often fragile. Many come from countries with shattered health systems, and have endured months or even years on the move without **access to health** care, while at constant risk of violence and exploitation. Many of those now in Europe carry the physical and emotional scars of their ordeal and have missed out on the most basic health care, including **immunization**. The **health of infants, pregnant women, and mothers who are breastfeeding**, is jeopardized by a lack of **health and nutrition services**.

Crowded and unhygienic living conditions expose child refugees and migrants to greater risk of infections during their perilous journeys and on arrival. Once in Europe, they often face continued barriers to accessing health care, due to cultural barriers, bureaucracy, and a lack of information in their own language.

These children often have complex health needs, which may go far beyond poor physical health. Migration has a negative impact, for example, on their **mental health and psychosocial wellbeing**. And that impact is intensified by

poor living conditions, a lack of supportive social networks and, all too often, hostility from host communities. Many parents and caregivers, confronted with barriers to health care and other basic services, and constant uncertainty about the future of their families, face severe stress, and this can undermine their ability to meet the physical and emotional needs of their children at a crucial point in their development.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is another – and particularly harsh – challenge that affects many refugee and migrant children and young people. A chronic lack of child-friendly health information and durable solutions has heightened the risks of GBV, sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancies, and the devastating consequences of all three for mental health.

The global **COVID-19 pandemic** has heightened all of these risks to the health and well-being of refugee and migrant children over the past year – coinciding with the first year of the 'RM Child-health' initiative – while lockdowns have deepened their marginalization.

Key facts and figures from the first year of the initiative



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

2,446 medical examinations for 1,254 children

1,431 infants and children reached by health and nutrition services

840 children benefit from psychosocial counselling.

BULGARIA

More than **1,000 children and women** reached by health literacy package

569 women and children reached by state-led health services

319 beneficiaries reached by sessions on gender-based violence (GBV).

GREECE

Child and Family Support Hub on Lesbos becomes an **emergency shelter** after the destruction of the Moria camp, offering **psychosocial help** to women and children

1,796 children and **464 parents** reached with health information

1,313 women reached with information on GBV; **394 children** reached with GBV services.

ITALY

More than **10,887 refugees and migrants** reached with information on health

More than **6,000 subscribers** reached with health information via U-Report on the Move

219 children and their families reached with GBV interventions, including referrals.

SERBIA

More than **900 children** travelling alone benefit from psychosocial support

556 children access GBV services and safe spaces

47 frontline workers reached with toolkit to identify unaccompanied or separated girls, and 40 students enrol in new university course on protecting children affected by migration.

Source: Strengthening Refugee and Migrant Children's Health Status in Southern and South-Eastern Europe - Interim Technical Report, May 2021.



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Highlights from the first full year of 'RM Child-Health'

Strengthening national capacity

Health systems that work for the most vulnerable children – including those who are refugees and migrants – are systems that work for every child. In the past year, the initiative has worked to increase the access of child refugees and migrants to life-saving immunizations, safeguard their mental and emotional health, protect them from gender-based violence, and support maternal and newborn health care and nutrition. [Read more ...](#)

Improving health literacy

Over the past year, the initiative has generated an impressive pool of evidence-based materials and approaches to empower young refugees and migrants, including information materials on a wide range of health risks and services. Medical interpreters and cultural mediators have enhanced communication between refugee and migrant communities and health care providers. [Read more ...](#)

Strengthening the implementation of health policies

The initiative has supported training programmes to help frontline health-care workers respond effectively to the needs of refugee and migrant children and their families. National health authorities have received technical support to develop, update, and improve the implementation of their policies and tackle the bottlenecks that hamper access to health care for refugee and migrant children. [Read more ...](#)

Safeguarding the health of refugee and migrant children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns has been particularly acute for the world's most vulnerable populations, including Europe's refugees and migrants. The initiative has ramped up effective approaches to health and has adapted actions so they are responsive and efficient in the face of the additional vulnerabilities generated by the pandemic. [Read more ...](#)



Voices from the field

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Bosnia and Herzegovina



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With funding from the 'RM Child-Health' initiative, UNICEF and its partners support holistic paediatric health services for refugee and migrant children in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Over the past year, the initiative has helped to ensure that every refugee and migrant child in the country has had access to paediatric health services. Such support is particularly important for children like Adil, who have made their long journeys alone. [Read more ...](#)

Bulgaria



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With funding from the 'RM Child-Health Initiative', Bulgaria's Council of Refugee Women (CRW) works with UNICEF to guide refugees through the vaccination process, paving the way for a healthier

future. This is a useful entry point, enabling frontline workers to connect refugees and migrants to a range of health services. [Read more ...](#)

Greece



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For refugee women in Greece, the 'Mother and Child Spaces' in Athens and Thessaloniki are places of safety and peace, where they find respite from their daily cares. With support from the 'RM Child-Health'

initiative, UNICEF and its partner, METAdrasi, use these Spaces to provide much-needed childcare while women visit asylum service offices. METAdrasi workers and volunteers are on hand to share their sorrows and celebrations, as the story of two mothers illustrates. [Read more ...](#)

Italy



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With co-funding from the 'RM Child-Health Initiative', health teams in Rome have reached vulnerable refugee and migrant children and families with vital support and information, even at the height of the COVID-19

pandemic. Families in one over-crowded building on the edge of Rome, for example, learned how to protect themselves and others against infection, and mobilized to keep COVID-19 out. [Read more ...](#)

Serbia



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Funding from the 'RM Child-health' initiative supports work by UNICEF that looks beyond basic healthcare to safeguard the mental health of children and youth. The initiative is enabling UNICEF to work

with Serbia's Institute of Mental Health to assess substance use among refugee and migrant children and youth. The research has been challenging and inspiring, as one researcher explains. [Read more ...](#)

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