

**From survival to integration:**

**Investing in a better future**

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## The opportunity we can't afford to miss:

### A child protection policy that leads to integration

Greece, like many other European countries, is facing a dual challenge: demographic decline and a shortage of labor in key sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and construction. These shortages are not just projections -they have already begun to affect the country's competitiveness and development prospects. Equally urgent, though less visible, is the growing need to fill the widening gaps in elderly care, exacerbated by the aging population.

At the same time, thousands of people, including unaccompanied refugee children, are arriving in Greece in search of safety and protection. Rather than being viewed as a burden, these young people can -and must- be part of the solution.

We recognize the efforts made by the Prime Minister and relevant Ministries over the past few years, particularly

since 2019, to protect unaccompanied minors. For the first time, clear child protection standards were introduced, a dedicated General Secretariat was created, the National Guardianship System was established, and quality requirements for shelters were legislated. These are fundamental prerequisites for implementing a protection and integration policy for one of the most vulnerable groups of children and adolescents in the country.

However, despite these important steps, putting into practice a fair child protection and integration policy that respects and adheres to Greece's international legal obligations currently faces multiple political and institutional obstacles.

The inhumane and unsuitable living conditions in Reception and Identification Centers



(RICs) across the Greek islands and mainland put children's safety and well-being at risk, while violating their fundamental rights. Although the National Guardianship System has been established, it remains largely dysfunctional. Difficulty accessing basic services, along with delays in asylum procedures, significantly impede the work of both the State and Civil Society Organizations, undermining the progress that has been made so far.

Over the past eight years, The HOME Project has provided shelter, care, and comprehensive support to more than 1,400 unaccompanied children. Many of these children have grown into young adults, active citizens, employees, and students thriving at universities and jobs, both in Greece and abroad. These young people consider Greece their home and want to contribute to its growth. Half of our staff come from the refugee and migrant community, and our experience has shown that when we invest in a holistic framework of support, education, and social

inclusion, young refugees respond positively -not only do they integrate but they flourish. Key elements of success include a solid child protection framework, hands-on and accelerated Greek language learning, partnerships with universities and technical schools offering education and vocational training, and targeted synergies with employers to facilitate entry into the job market.

The need to recognize refugee and asylum seeker integration is not unique to Greece. In Spain, the government has regularized around one million people who had lived in the country for years without legal status, to meet labor market demands and address demographic decline. Similarly, in Italy -despite hostile rhetoric- residence permits have been granted to approximately 500,000 refugees and migrants to support sectors facing severe labor shortages. These examples show that behind tough populist statements, more governments are recognizing the need for practical, realistic integration approaches.



Photo Credit: Humo H. Yardim



A significant example is the initiative led by Ed Shapiro, one of The HOME Project's key supporters, who funds innovative programs that train young refugees in countries like Kenya and Jordan and connect them with employers in Canada seeking skilled workers. These programs are now expanding into Europe, with pilot projects underway in Germany, Spain, and Italy.

The numbers speak for themselves: Greece is expected to need over [750,000 new workers](#) by 2050. At the European level, the number exceeds 50 million. Instead of examining complex, expensive, and time-consuming strategies to import labor from third countries, we could harness the potential of the thousands of people already living among us.

Greek authorities have primarily treated unaccompanied minors as a temporary or transit population rather than as children who could settle here and should therefore be integrated meaningfully into society. Consequently, a comprehensive, long-term child protection plan was never properly developed.

Instead, a parallel system for unaccompanied minors emerged, which has proven difficult to implement and fails to fully address their complex needs. This fragmented approach has also revealed significant gaps and inadequacies within Greece's broader child protection system, especially in healthcare, mental health services, education, and foster care.

This report aims to shed light on the key factors contributing to the child protection gap in Greece, which The HOME Project actively works to address.

Above all, we seek to emphasize that by shifting our perspective and not scapegoating refugees as a threat -but instead recognizing them as valuable and untapped human capital, a hidden opportunity- we can address labor market challenges, boost economic growth, and foster a society of equal opportunities.

**Refugee integration is not charity. It is an investment in the social and economic prosperity of our country.**

Photo Credit: Salah Darwish







## Emergency on the ground

In 2024, [nearly one-third of all arrivals](#) in Greece were children. Of these, almost 60% were under 12 years old, and 22% of all children were registered as unaccompanied or separated minors.

Upon arrival, unaccompanied and separated children are placed in designated «Safe Zones» within Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) at the Aegean islands -Lesvos, Samos, Kos, Leros, and Chios- as well as mainland sites such as Malakassa (Attica), Diavata (Thessaloniki), and Fylakio (Evros). These «Safe Zones» are intended as temporary accommodations,

where children should stay for a maximum of 25 days to be registered before being transferred to appropriate shelters.

Since late 2024, Civil Society Organizations in the Child Rights Advocacy Network (CRAN) [have raised serious concerns](#) about overcrowding and the lack of access to child protection services. Basic necessities including healthcare, legal support, education, and even clothes, shoes, and blankets were unavailable. This created a «children's emergency», with urgent calls for improved protection measures.

[Despite the 25-day limit](#), many children remain in «Safe Zones» for extended periods, sometimes months, due to lack of shelter capacity. These prolonged stays amount to de facto detention, recognized by four national court rulings in early 2025. The courts found that restrictive living conditions in these «Safe Zones» violate children's rights to freedom of movement and protection.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) intervened in February 2025, [granting interim measures](#) for four children detained in the Samos «Safe Zone», instructing the Greek government to ensure their safety by providing adequate food, clothing, medical and psychological care, and arranging their transfer to appropriate shelters. In May 2025, it extended these measures to [46 additional](#)

[unaccompanied](#) minors from the same facility, emphasizing ongoing failures to protect these vulnerable children.

Although Greece officially abolished the detention of children in 2020, current conditions reveal serious gaps in the child protection system and highlight the urgent need for comprehensive, long-term solutions. In 2024, government cost-cutting measures led to a [significant reduction in available shelter places](#) for unaccompanied minors -from 2,500 to 1,500. As a result, hundreds of children are left in limbo: repeatedly getting transferred from camp to camp or forced to remain in temporary, unsuitable facilities. This instability heightens their vulnerability and hinders their access to consistent care and integration.



Photo Credit: Huseyin Aközüm





Photo Credit: The Joel Carillet

## Death toll of children in the Aegean Sea

More than 100 child refugees -including unaccompanied minors- have drowned in 2024 due to shipwrecks in Greek territorial waters along the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR), according to UNHCR and [Refugee Support Aegean](#). This route remains one of the deadliest migration corridors in Europe and worldwide. This heartbreaking loss of life must serve as an urgent call to prevent further tragedies and reaffirm our commitment to protecting displaced populations escaping conflict, persecution, violence, and human rights abuses.

Of particular concern are the increasingly violent practices attributed to the Hellenic

Coast Guard. Frontex has urged potential disciplinary action against Greece over [13 open cases of alleged migrant rights violations](#) -the highest number in the EU- including illegal pushbacks, as well as warnings of possible funding cuts and legal proceedings.

We cannot wait for more lives to be lost before taking decisive action. We call on authorities at the national and European levels to intensify efforts to protect those forced to flee and invest in policies upholding the rights and safety of the most vulnerable.





Photo Credit: Chandler Crutenden

## Financial instability for Civil Society Organizations providing shelter and care

The crisis extends beyond children's suffering. Organizations providing shelter and care to unaccompanied minors face extensive delays in receiving agreed funding through the European Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), co-funded by the EU and managed by Greece's Ministry of Migration and Asylum. Approved funding arrives months later than agreed and is frequently incomplete.

This financial uncertainty places immense pressure on Civil Society Organizations, which depend almost entirely on AMIF funding, threatening their survival and program continuity. At times, several organizations have been forced to delay payroll for their staff members and have struggled to cover basic operational costs, such as rent

and utility bills for their shelters. At The HOME Project, 52% of our annual budget comes from AMIF and we partner with the private sector to cover the remaining 48%, so that we can fully implement our child protection model, maintain the high quality of our services and ensure that we can continue to support refugee youth as they transition into adulthood and are fully integrated into society.

The commitment that we make to our team, our partners, and most importantly to the children under our care, is that we will be there to support them every step of the way. Consequently, it is imperative for us to know when and where our funding will be coming from so that we are able to plan effectively and ensure the long-term sustainability of our projects.





Photo Credit: Assad Tanoli

## Public narrative hostility

Things are exacerbated by the rise of violent incidents from far-right extremists, as well as the way in which these issues are handled by the police and mainstream media. Only in the last few months, there have been several reports which have included verbal abuse, threats, intimidation and physical attacks of unaccompanied minors both in the streets and by radical groups who tried to break into their shelters. There has even been legal action taken by certain individuals against the prospect of a shelter operating within their neighborhood. In our case, both our beneficiaries and members of our staff have repeatedly experienced violence and abuse of power from the police.

However, stories in the media tend to promote an anti-refugee sentiment and fail to recognize the real perpetrators. Political parties have frequently capitalized on the discontent that is being cultivated, framing refugees as a threat to Greek culture and security. This has led to protests

against the establishment of new shelters or schools for refugee children, making it harder for NGOs to operate safely.

The Greek government has taken an increasingly hardline stance on refugees, with policies aimed at deterring new arrivals. Authorities are focusing on bolstering border security and fast-tracking deportations, often at the expense of providing adequate care for refugees already in the country. While the government claims to acknowledge the need for better protection of unaccompanied minors, its actions often undermine any efforts to improve their situation.

From our side, we strive to develop meaningful ties within the communities in which we operate through events and local engagement, in order to break stereotypes, combat xenophobia and cultivate the meaningful integration of our children and their development into community-minded citizens.





## Gaps in the guardianship system

The guardianship system is essential for ensuring the protection, representation, and well-being of unaccompanied minors. Even though the legal framework has already been established, several challenges remain regarding its implementation, limiting its effectiveness in practice.

The most pressing issue is the delay in appointing guardians. In some cases, children remain without legal representation for several months, which prevents their access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and legal support. Even after a guardian is assigned, the lack of timely power of attorney often hampers urgent procedures.

Concerns have also been raised about inconsistent coordination between guardians and shelter staff, particularly the children's lawyers. At times, decisions are taken without prior consultation, creating confusion and undermining trust. There have also been reports of legal independence being compromised, with requests for «suitability

certificates» from lawyers, while guardians choose to act independently and provide legal guidance without involving a child's attorney or having the necessary expertise to do so.

Frequent changes in guardians -particularly following transfers- can disrupt continuity in care, as important case knowledge is lost. Additionally, guardians are not always present during crucial moments, such as medical assessments or emergencies, placing undue pressure on shelter staff who do not have legal authority to act.

Finally, the absence of a unified protocol outlining roles and responsibilities has led to inconsistent practices and uncertainty for the professionals involved, as well as the children themselves.

To address these challenges, it is critical to establish clear, binding guidelines that support effective coordination, safeguard legal independence, and ensure children receive timely, appropriate support.





Photo Credit: Clover Photo

## Legal and bureaucratic hurdles

Most unaccompanied minors arrive without legal papers and are unregistered. At The HOME Project, our legal team handles asylum applications and family reunification procedures, but the Greek system is slow and bureaucratically tangled, taking years to navigate.

There are significant delays in the registration of refugee children and the initial interview as part of their asylum application procedure, as well as an increasingly large number of rejections of their applications in the first degree, without clear reasoning.

In 2024 alone, there were [5,139 asylum applications](#) from unaccompanied minors. At the same time, family reunifications progressed

extremely slowly, with only 130 reunifications completed. Guardian appointment delays further prolong these processes; children miss deadlines for asylum or reunification applications. Interviews are often canceled or postponed for months due to the lack of interpreters, with NGOs sometimes asked to provide and fund external interpreters.

Additionally, age determination processes, which are often utilized following the initial rejection of family reunification applications, have been criticized for being invasive and unreliable, while DNA tests can cause more delays. Meanwhile, children endure prolonged uncertainty and anxiety.





Photo Credit: Marianna Kakounaki

## Access to education

Education is crucial for the development and social integration of unaccompanied minors. At The HOME Project, all children under our care are enrolled in public, intercultural, or private schools and also receive extra support from specialized tutors in our shelters. These help develop their language, behavioral, social, and vocational skills. In addition, our innovative educational programs, in partnership with esteemed private schools, create safe spaces for interaction between Greek and refugee children, and accelerate their learning.

Nevertheless, reception classes designed to support unaccompanied minors within the public education system are available only in selected

schools, offer limited spaces, and almost never begin at the start of the academic year. To make matters worse, last year they were reduced by 30% in Athens. As a result, even when we are able to secure a spot, our children are often faced with long commutes to reach the assigned school. This inevitably compromises their access to suitable academic lessons -particularly Greek language instruction- and leads to high dropout rates.

Additionally, there are severe delays by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in assigning guardians to unaccompanied minors. As a result, it can take months before these children are able to enter a classroom, especially those attending high school.





## Systemic barriers to mental health support

At The HOME Project, our team of experts conducts thorough psychiatric and psychological assessments of each child's mental and medical state. Refugee children often exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and currently, 1 out of every 4 new arrivals requires clinical treatment. To address these complex needs, our resident psychologists, in collaboration with our Mental Health Coordinator and a culturally-sensitive Child Psychiatrist, provide mental health support through both individual and group

interventions — including art therapy, counselling, speech therapy, and psychotherapy.

At the same time, to safeguard the well-being of our staff and maintain the quality of services provided, we conduct weekly supervision sessions, facilitated by external mental health professionals. These aim to prevent burnout, provide emotional and professional support, and ensure that our team members are equipped to handle the demanding nature of their work.



However, access to child psychiatric care for unaccompanied minors in Athens remains severely limited within the framework of the National Health System (ESY). Public child psychiatric units have an extremely small number of available beds (even for Greek children), resulting in long waiting lists - in some cases, admission can take up to three months, according to medical reports. As a result, very few of the children in our care who require hospitalization have actually been admitted. In the rare instances where hospitalization has been secured, the duration of support provided was notably short, falling far below what is needed for effective treatment and recovery.

The lack of specialized facilities becomes even more acute when involuntary hospitalization is required, as the procedure requires the involvement of the police - a practice that often causes additional trauma to already vulnerable children. Moreover, there have been incidents where duty officers refuse to notify the on-call prosecutor during night hours, keeping minors in detention until the juvenile prosecutor is informed the following morning.

The current situation highlights the urgent need to strengthen the child psychiatric sector of the National Health System and to establish specially designed services and staff trainings for unaccompanied minors.



Photo Credit: Marina Nikolopoulos



## Integration into the National Foster Care System

As part of the restructuring of the adoption and foster care system, the ANYNET platform was launched to manage cases of minors eligible for adoption or foster care, along with those of certified prospective foster parents. In 2018, a directive was issued requiring all shelters for unaccompanied refugee minors to register children under the age of 12.

Social services were tasked with assessing whether a minor's psychosocial condition made them suitable for foster care. Children whose biological parents were present in the country and had applied to regain custody, as well as minors undergoing family reunification procedures,

were excluded. Automated matches were made based on the preferences of prospective foster parents in terms of age and gender.

Our experience showed that a high number of matches fell through due to factors such as the child's origin (they are mainly from the Middle East and Africa), legal status (asylum seekers or protection beneficiaries), and religion, all of which led prospective foster parents to withdraw. In 2023, the term «Unaccompanied Minor» was added to the platform to allow prospective parents to explicitly select this group and reduce disconnections based on the criteria mentioned earlier.

### Key Issues:

- **Lack of information and training** for foster parent candidates on the specific characteristics of unaccompanied minors and the crucial role that foster care can play in their development, despite a 2023 national awareness campaign.
- **Exclusion of minors aged 12–17** from the foster care process, despite no clear legal prohibition.
- **Lack of training** for social workers and psychologists across the country on the needs of unaccompanied minors, hindering effective foster care case management.
- **Challenges in completing formalities:** even when a match is made, social workers and juvenile prosecutors often lack procedural knowledge, requiring legal support from our organization.
- **Issues with guardianship:** delays or irregularities in appointing guardians -whose presence and agreement is legally required for completing necessary paperwork- have repeatedly prevented timely registration of unaccompanied minors on the ANYNET platform, effectively excluding many of them from foster care.
- **Discrimination:** unaccompanied minors are registered exclusively for foster care and excluded from adoption, based solely on their legal status -constituting clear discrimination.





## Need for 18+ Support

To date, there are no systematic or state-supported services to facilitate the constructive integration or unlock the workforce potential of unaccompanied minors who reach adulthood while residing in shelters. Once these young people turn 18, the support structures available to them drop off sharply, leaving them vulnerable at a critical life juncture.

At The HOME Project, we operate two shelters for refugee youth and are committed to providing comprehensive support as they transition into adulthood. This includes helping them navigate the job market, access vocational and educational opportunities, and take the necessary steps toward independence. In addition to offering these essential services, we provide specialized support for teenage mothers who arrive at our shelters while pregnant.

We ensure they receive the care they need for both themselves and their babies. Beyond immediate support, we also assist them in preparing for the future — whether that's

furthering their education, entering the workforce, or gaining the skills needed for autonomy. We are dedicated to empowering every young person, including young mothers, to build a brighter future for themselves and their families.

We are currently awaiting the implementation of the Helios Junior program, a new initiative designed to support up to 2,000 former unaccompanied minors in their transition to independent living and integration into the labor market. The program is expected to provide:

- 18 months of housing support
- Counseling and educational services
- Job placement assistance
- A monthly financial allowance of €150 for a duration of 16 months

However, a significant gap remains: the program does not extend to young people over the age of 21, leaving a portion of this already marginalized population without access to structured post-adulthood support.



## Conclusion

The paradox we are currently experiencing is that Greece wants to close its borders to the people who could help solve its demographic crisis. Refugees -who often come from younger age groups- can contribute meaningfully by filling labor gaps, supporting economic growth, and sustaining vital public services.

Greece, in particular, faces severe shortages in key sectors such as agriculture, construction, and tourism. These jobs, although critical for the economy, are seasonal, physically demanding, and generally unattractive to the local workforce.

It is important to understand that refugee flows are like water. We cannot stop them -because people are not leaving their homes out of choice, but out of necessity, in order to survive. When we

shut off all legal pathways for them, they are left with no option but to turn to illegal ones.

Instead of viewing them as a burden, we need to start seeing them as an asset. By investing in their training, integrating them into the workforce, enabling their economic participation, and supporting them to reach their full potential, we can address labor shortages, enhance growth, and enrich our society. The key to unlocking these benefits lies in effective integration policies that promote language acquisition, skill development, social inclusion, and access to employment opportunities.

And it all begins with the care, guidance, and support we offer to the children who arrive in Greece alone. That's why our work is so important.





Photo Credit: Stelios Vellis

At **The HOME Project** we:

**HELP** refugee children find safety and security

**OVERCOME** barriers by supporting them every step of the way

**MOTIVATE** reintegration and healing

**EMPOWER** new beginnings



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