

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN GREECE

May – August 2025



1. From rising arrivals to rising restrictions: children at risk

In the [first half of 2025](#), Greece recorded a level of arrivals broadly comparable to last year's, sustaining the elevated numbers recorded last year, —when asylum applications reached a five-year high. Children continue to represent **more than one-fifth of all sea arrivals**, with [30% of them unaccompanied or separated](#).

A distinctive feature of 2025 has been a significant shift in arrival patterns, with most people arriving by sea to Crete, primarily via the Libya–Crete route. Most people arriving in Crete originated from [Egypt \(47%\), Sudan \(27%\), and Bangladesh \(19%\)](#). According to UNHCR, by June 2025, Crete received [42% of all sea arrivals](#). This represents a **350% increase in arrivals to Crete compared to 2024**. This route is notable not only for the volume but also for the profile of arrivals, which often include unaccompanied children (sometimes making up [more than one-third of passengers](#)) as well as families with young children, including infants.

Despite this sharp increase, reception arrangements on the island remain ad hoc and unsuitable, with little evidence of measures taken by authorities to address the situation. Newly arrived refugees, including children and infants, are often accommodated in temporary, informal spaces lacking basic infrastructure—such as the former Agyia exhibition centre in Chania or disused port facilities in Heraklion—[where conditions have been described as “undignified” and posing serious “health risks”](#). With no operational Reception and Identification Service on the island, authorities are failing to systematically register or screen new arrivals, leaving vulnerabilities—such as unaccompanied children, survivors of violence, or people with urgent medical needs—undetected and unsupported.

A new asylum ban puts children at risk

The **sharp increase in arrivals to Crete in 2025**, has been met not with strengthened protection measures but with new restrictions. On 11 July 2025, the Greek government adopted a legislative measure (Article 79 of Law 5218/2025) **suspending for three months the access to the asylum procedure** for people arriving on a boat from North Africa to Crete. Under this provision, such individuals are returned to their country of origin or nationality without their asylum claim being registered. The government initially announced plans to build **detention centres** in Crete for migrants and refugees, including children. However, following strong reactions from local communities, the MoMA is now considering the construction of two or three [temporary registration centres](#) instead.

“Both before and after the three-month suspension of the right to asylum by the Greek authorities, no adequate reception conditions are in place for people arriving from North Africa. On the contrary, what we continue to witness is the criminalisation of entry in the country, with people—including children—being prosecuted for having to steer the boats, seeking safety. At the same time, it remains unclear how and through what procedure the vulnerability of the newly arrived is assessed, as there appears to be no on-site mechanism in place, at least not one that we are aware of.” — Deputy Coordinator of GCR's Legal Unit, based in Crete.

The July decision to suspend the asylum applications processing has sparked widespread criticism among national and international bodies, including the [Greek National Commission for Human Rights](#), the [Greek Ombudsman](#), the [Union of Greek Administrative Judges](#), the [Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and [UNHCR](#). More than [100 civil society organisations](#) have jointly called for the measure to be immediately withdrawn, warning that it violates the right to seek asylum and protection from refoulement. More broadly, the Greek Government's approach contravenes EU and international law, exposing children to heightened risks to their rights, safety and wellbeing. Detention is never in a child's best interest—a principle enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This situation reflects a broader pattern seen across the EU of misusing “emergency laws” to prioritise deterrence and border control over child protection. As highlighted in Save the Children's report [Crossing Lines: Realities of Migrant Children at EU External Borders](#), such measures—including those previously used in Greece (March 2020), Poland, and Finland—have led to widespread pushbacks, denial of access to asylum, and systematic violations of children's rights.

Shortly after the asylum ban was imposed, GCR, which provides free legal assistance and representation to refugees and asylum seekers, [visited detainees](#) in the Amygdaleza Pre-removal Detention Centre (PRDC), where [unaccompanied children](#) were among those held. At the time of writing, those arriving during the ban are being held primarily in PRDCs or in Sintiki closed center, where conditions are dire for all-even [police officers](#). To our knowledge, no systematic vulnerability assessments are carried out. As a result, UAC who lack access to a lawyer, or whose claim to be minors is dismissed by authorities, risk remaining undetected among adult detainees. Together with Refugee Support Aegean, GCR requested [interim measures](#) (Rule 39) before the ECtHR on behalf of eight Sudanese nationals in Amygdaleza. On 14 August, the Court granted the request, preventing their removal, until national courts have examined their cases.

Government pressure on NGOs and access to justice

Just days later, on 20 August, the MoMA publicly [criticised registered](#) NGOs for initiating legal actions. Subsequent [media reports](#) suggested that audits and even de-registration could be pursued against NGOs perceived as opposing government migration policy. These statements prompted a strong response from the [Coordinating Committee of the Plenary of the Presidents of the Bar Associations of Greece](#), which reminded the authorities that “*access to justice is an inalienable right, and no one can be excluded from judicial review*”.

2. ‘Return or imprisonment’¹, children included

In mid-July, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum launched a two-week [consultation](#) on its new returns legislation. The draft proposals introduce significantly stricter return rules, including longer periods of detention, reduced time for voluntary departure, electronic tagging, [criminalisation of irregular stay](#) with non-suspended sentences, and the repeal of the “exceptional reasons” residence permit for people who have lived in Greece irregularly for seven consecutive years. Additional provisions cover the use of AI in asylum procedures, increased fees for subsequent applications, and other restrictive measures.

As highlighted by members of the [Child Rights Advocacy Network](#) (CRAN) in their comments on the consultation, the draft law poses serious risks to children’s rights. If adopted in its current form, children within families could face detention for up to 24 months, in breach of EU law, CJEU rulings, and national jurisprudence². The text also fails to exempt children from the criminalisation of “irregular” stay and does not impose a clear obligation to consider alternatives to detention—both of which contradict the principle of the best interests of the child. Furthermore, there are insufficient guarantees that children will be heard in decisions directly affecting them, such as return orders (Art. 11). Article 15 further restricts access to education, limiting it to compulsory schooling only, thereby excluding many children who are—or should be—in secondary education, and providing no safeguards for continuity of schooling when parents are subject to return.

3. Failing safeguards: children in Greece’s Reception and Asylum system

Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) are among the most vulnerable individuals within Greece’s asylum and migration system. Worryingly, recent policy changes risk further undermining the protection they are entitled to: on 22 August, MoMA announced a [new age assessment procedure](#) to be conducted “once and on the same day”. The Ministry further stated that “those who falsely declare they are minors will face consequences, while those who refuse the check will be presumed adults”. As of [1st July 2025](#), MoMA reports that there are 1,860 UASC in Greece. The majority are boys (92%), and a significant proportion are adolescents over the age of 15 (86%).

In May and June, the European Court of Human Rights again granted interim measures for children in CCACs, this time to protect 58 UAC in [Samos](#) and [Leros CCAC](#), highlighting the serious risks they face. The Greek Ombudsman has likewise [questioned](#) whether the best interests of the child can ever be met in such environments. Amid mounting evidence and growing condemnation from Greek CSOs and international bodies, the Samos “safe area” was officially closed in May 2025 —with children relocated to alternative “safe areas” or accommodation sites. A [recent report](#) on some of these alternatives, the Kos and Leros “safe areas”, confirms persistent problems, including prolonged stays, family separation, overcrowding, violence, infestations, poor sanitation, limited access to education and healthcare, and harassment of girls.

¹ “Return or imprisonment” is the exact phrasing used by Minister Thanos Plevris in official communication materials circulated on social media, as reported by the Greek press ([«Ρατσιστικό σόου μετά τον νόμο Πλεούρη»](#), *Εφημερίδα των Συντακτών*, 22 July 2025).

² See Article 15(5,6) of the Returns Directive (2008/115/EC) and CJEU, [C-357/09 PPU, Kadzoev](#), paras. 60 and 69, and [C-924/19 PPU and C-925/19 PPU](#), para. 279 that ruled that the Returns Directive does not allow exceeding the maximum detention period provided by its provisions (a total of 6 + 12 months).

Ali, 16 – The impact of extended detention on a child.

Ali is a 16-year-old unaccompanied child from Egypt who arrived in Samos on 12 November 2024. He was detained for 196 days in the Samos Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC), leaving the facility only three times, exclusively for hospitalisation. During his detention, Ali reported being in absolute distress, suffering from persistent suicidal thoughts, and being both a victim and witness of physical and verbal abuse by the Police. On 26 May 2025, Ali was finally transferred to a shelter on the mainland.

** This testimony was documented by HRLP, a frontline legal aid organisation and CRAN member supporting Ali during and after his time in 'detention'.*

Many children described feeling “effectively incarcerated”. In this context—where many children in 'safe areas' or upon arrival in Greece remain without a guardian for prolonged periods due to systemic delays—a recent [Supreme Court Circular](#) advises that, when a UASC relocates (for example, from an island facility to a mainland shelter), a guardian from the same NGO should be appointed promptly. While this measure seeks to address past gaps, its effectiveness will ultimately depend on consistent application in practice.

Families with children are also facing insecure housing, abrupt evictions, and conditions that undermine their safety and well-being. Asylum-seeking children within families are often accommodated in remote CAFTAs or CCACs under poor conditions³. Since May 2025, camp authorities have issued verbal eviction orders to **recognised refugees** and rejected asylum seekers⁴, frequently giving only a few days' notice and providing no alternative housing, as [jointly reported](#) by frontline organisations. GCR documented cases of a seven-member Afghan family, including a pregnant woman and

two children with respiratory issues, who received an eviction order despite their serious and documented vulnerabilities. These removals occur against the backdrop of the government's earlier termination of housing programmes⁵, forcing families into remote camps and obstructing integration. The impact on children is profound, prompting opposition and criticism also from teachers, who are [warning](#) that “this measure results in the repeated uprooting of hundreds of pupils across the country – children who are trying to overcome the painful experiences of being refugees who struggle every day to stand tall under conditions of extreme poverty, marginalization and social exclusion, with the dream of living in peace and prosperity, and who, at school, regain their right to childhood”.

4. Education access improves, but Greece must do better⁶

Access to education remains a critical issue for refugee and asylum-seeking children in Greece. According to the [UNHCR Protection Monitoring of Refugees](#), which collects data through regular surveys and direct engagement with [recognized refugee communities](#)⁷, the percentage of school-aged children living with their families and attending formal education dropped significantly from 74% in 2023 to just 57% in [2024](#).

Ministry of Education data for the 2024–25 school year - which covers children of refugee background more broadly, including asylum seekers - reports 17,195 enrolled in the Greek school system (a 26% increase compared to 2024), with 90% attending classes. Pupils come primarily from Egypt (19%), Ukraine (13%), India (13%), Syria (12%), Afghanistan (10%) and 65 other countries. Forty-two percent are girls and 58% boys, with the majority (56%) under 12 years old. Most children (68,7%) attend regular (morning) reception classes in schools, while 10% attend evening classes. To support these students, the Ministry hired 1,588 teachers and social workers for reception classes during the school year⁸. As highlighted in a [joint report](#) by Save the Children and the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), while the law⁹ guarantees the right to attend public school, significant

³ See GCR-Save the Children report (2024) [“It does not feel like real life”: Children’s everyday life in Greek refugee camps](#).

⁴ Although beneficiaries of international protection are legally required to leave camp-based accommodation within 30 days of receiving asylum status, this timeframe is rarely enough to secure essential documents and access housing.

⁵ Since the closure of the ESTIA accommodation scheme in late 2022, state-run camps are the only government-provided “housing” for asylum seekers.

⁶ This title also references GCR, Save the Children and Terre des Hommes 2022 report, [“Must Do Better: Grading the Greek Government’s Efforts on Education for Refugee Children”](#), highlighting that while some progress has been made, many challenges identified in 2022 persist.

⁷ Key findings derive from 548 interviews conducted primarily with recognized refugees and subsidiary protection status holders in the course of 2024.

⁸ Data provided on 22 August 2025 by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs upon GCR’s request

⁹ Indicatively see L. 4939/2022, art. 55,56 and art. 27

barriers persist, including delays in registration, transportation challenges, and shortcomings in reception classes¹⁰- with the lack of stable housing further exacerbating these issues.

Despite improvements for asylum-seeking children, UASC face particularly severe challenges¹¹. Harsh living conditions in camps, uncertainty around legal status, limited vocational options, and systemic problems – such as the lack of *permanent* reception class teachers - continue to hinder their educational progress. Combined with social isolation, discrimination, and limited integration opportunities, these obstacles further marginalize children and undermine their ability to thrive. As the new school year approaches, GCR has received complaints from young adults who have just turned 18 that they are barred from school due to lack of documentation. Until a transitional residence permit covering the legal stay of children turning 18 is institutionalized, the new provision in the Migration Code¹² - which grants a 10-year residence permit to former UASC - remains ineffective.

5. Policy recommendations

The sharp rise in arrivals to Crete demands urgent protection measures, not punitive restrictions.

The Greek government must immediately reverse the suspension of asylum registration under Article 79 and ensure all refugees and asylum seekers—especially children and families—have access to fair, timely asylum procedures. Decisions affecting children must fully uphold the best interests of the child principle, recognizing that detention and other restrictive measures violate international and EU law and are harmful to children’s safety and well-being.

Somewhere safe to grow, ensure housing and protection for all children

The EU and the Greek government must ensure that every child—whether unaccompanied or with their family—has access to safe, dignified, and stable accommodation. Authorities should immediately end detention-like “safe areas” and halt forced evictions from camps until sustainable housing alternatives are in place. All housing decisions must prioritise the best interests of the child, preventing repeated uprooting, family separation, and school disruption.

Greece’s migration policy must protect, not return, children

Greece’s policies should prioritise the protection and well-being of children - regardless of legal status - over forced return, in line with international and EU child rights standards. Rather than facilitate return, Greece must invest in child-centred alternatives, strengthening national reception and child protection systems and ensuring access to education, consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and EU acquis.

No child left behind: access, continuity, and pathways for youth

Greek authorities must ensure all refugee children have access to education. UASC need tailored vocational training and clear pathways to employment, while young adults turning 18 should receive transitional residence permits to continue schooling and training. Children require stable housing, properly staffed reception classes, and targeted support to overcome barriers - backed by adequate EU and national funding.

Protect civil society and access to justice: children’s rights depend on it

The EU and all Member States - including Greece - must safeguard civil society organisations providing legal aid and representation to refugees and asylum seekers, including children. Far from being adversaries, these organisations are essential partners in protecting children’s rights and upholding the rule of law. Threats, deregistration, or curbs on NGOs directly undermine children’s right to protection, fair asylum procedures, and justice. The Commission and Member States should ensure all children have access to free, child appropriate legal aid and that civil society is safeguarded as a cornerstone of children’s rights. EU funding should be conditioned on guarantees for civil society protection and adequate resourcing for child protection actors.

* This brief, authored by Agapi Chouzouraki (GCR) and Anne-Lise Dewulf (SCI), reflects information compiled and updated to the best of the authors’ knowledge as of 22 August 2025.

¹⁰ See also : « [Must do better: Grading the Greek government’s efforts on education for refugee children](#) », GCR and SCI (2022).

¹¹ According to a [report](#) by Foster Educators, among a sample of 1,521 UASC in secondary education in 2023-24, roughly one-third (33%) dropped-out of school (p. 19), while nearly 30% were not enrolled at all (p. 22).

¹² Article 161 para 1c’ of L 5038/1.4.2023