



## TIME ON THE MOVE AND THE PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

### VRIJEME PROVEDENO U POKRETU I PSIHO SOCIJALNI ISHODI MALOLJETNIKA BEZ PRATNJE

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#### ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the relationship between the psychosocial outcomes of unaccompanied minors and the time spent on the move. The study involved 75 unaccompanied minors aged 13 to 17 residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina in temporary reception centers, safe houses, or sleeping outdoors. A quantitative cross-sectional design was used, with data collected through a predefined questionnaire on migration conditions and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Data were processed using correlation analysis and multiple linear regression. Results indicate that prolonged time spent on the move is positively correlated with increased emotional and behavioral difficulties. The findings underscore the need for expedited reception and integration processes to minimize the negative impact of prolonged migration. Prolonged stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina showed potential benefits for adaptation, though its effect was not statistically significant. These insights contribute to addressing the challenges faced by unaccompanied minors and optimizing interventions.

**Keywords:** unaccompanied minors, time on the move, psychosocial outcomes, strengths and difficulties

#### SAŽETAK

Ovo istraživanje imalo je za cilj ispitati povezanost psihosocijalnih ishoda maloljetnika bez pratnje i vremena provedenog u pokretu. Studija je uključivala 75 maloljetnika bez pratnje u dobi od 13 do 17 godina koji borave u Bosni i Hercegovini u privremenim prihvatnim

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centrima, sigurnim kućama ili spavaju na otvorenom. Korišten je kvantitativni presječni dizajn, a podaci su prikupljeni putem unaprijed definiranog upitnika o migracijskim uvjetima i Upitnika o snagama i poteškoćama (SDQ). Podaci su obrađeni korištenjem korelacijske analize i višestruke regresijske analize. Rezultati pokazuju da je produženo vrijeme provedeno u pokretu pozitivno povezano s povećanim emocionalnim i ponašajnim poteškoćama. Nalazi naglašavaju potrebu za ubrzanim procesima prijema i integracije kako bi se smanjili negativni utjecaji produžene migracije. Produženi boravak u Bosni i Hercegovini pokazao je potencijalne koristi za prilagodbu, iako učinak nije bio statistički značajan. Ovi uvidi doprinose rješavanju izazova s kojima se suočavaju maloljetnici bez pratnje i prilagodba intervencija.

**Ključne riječi:** maloljetnici bez pratnje, vrijeme u pokretu, psihosocijalni ishodi, snage i poteškoće

## INTRODUCTION

Migration has been a persistent phenomenon throughout human history, encompassing the movement of individuals across international borders or within countries (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2014). Within this context, unaccompanied minors—a particularly vulnerable group—are often exposed to significant risks and challenges during migration. According to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005), unaccompanied minors are children under the age of 18 who are separated from both parents and are not under the care of an adult legally or customarily responsible for them.

Unaccompanied minors face numerous adversities, such as separation from family, exposure to violence, and lack of basic resources, all of which can negatively impact their psychosocial well-being (McAuliffe, 2016). These difficulties are compounded by extended periods of uncertainty and instability during migration. The concept of time spent on the move, encompassing the journey's duration and time in transit, is critical to understanding the psychosocial outcomes of these children (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). Prolonged time spent on the move has been associated with heightened risks, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007).

The current study aims to explore how time spent on the move influences the psychosocial outcomes of unaccompanied minors. Specifically, it investigates the relationship between this variable and the strengths and difficulties experienced by these children, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address their unique needs. By building on existing literature and incorporating empirical evidence, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex challenges faced by unaccompanied minors.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **Sample of participant**

The research was conducted with unaccompanied minors residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina accommodated in support systems such as temporary reception centers, a center for children and youth, safe houses, but also unaccompanied minors who sleep in the open. The study included 75 unaccompanied minors.

All juveniles (N=75) are a homogenized group by sex, male, heterogeneous by age, from 13 to 17 years of age at the time of the study. The distribution of respondents by age is shown in Figure 3.

The largest number of respondents are aged 16 years, while the number of those aged 17 is slightly smaller. The smallest number of respondents were those who were 13 years old at the time of conducting the study.

The research included unaccompanied minors from the Temporary reception center Ušivak and the Center for community services PUŽ. Minors who sleep in the open were approached through the outreach teams of the NGO Zemlja djece u BiH.

### **Method of conducting research**

In this research, a quantitative methodology was used, the aim of which is to establish a prediction and explain the causal relationships between the conditions of stay of unaccompanied minors on the road and the self-assessment of their strengths and difficulties. It is applied, crosssection research.

The research was conducted in cooperation with expert associates who work with unaccompanied minors, after obtaining the consent of the competent authorities as well as from a special guardian and consent of the minor to participate in the research. All ethical guidelines for conducting research involving children were followed, and the questionnaires themselves were encrypted, which ensured anonymity.

The research was conducted live during September 2023 directly from the respondents or through expert associates who were examiners.

In the process of conducting the research, the following ethical principles were respected: 1) the principle of informed consent of participants, 2) the principle of respect for the rights and dignity of participants, 3) the principle of respect for anonymity and confidentiality of data. Before the start of the research, the subjects were presented with the research, its goal and purpose in their native language. It was stated that participation is voluntary and anonymous and the data subjects were given the right to decide on participation themselves and give their consent by signing the statement. Despite giving their consent, they were free to stop participating in the study at any time. The respondents were not asked for personal data or data that could indicate the identity of the data subject, but the research was completely anonymous. In all cases where it was possible and where the guardian existed, his consent was obtained.

The methodology of conducting the research sought to meet the specifics of research in crisis contexts, especially respecting the principle of "do no harm". This was ensured through the collection of exclusively necessary data, with a minimum number of questionnaires, which

managed to offer highly reliable information through relatively few parcels, thanks to their metric characteristics.

The relevance of children's contributions to research and their ability to benefit from it also depends on the atmosphere and place where the research takes place. Research activities took place in safe and easily accessible places such as children's corners in temporary reception centres, or in the living room of the accommodation, often in the presence of responsible adults. Children are also provided with enough time and support to feel more confident in key areas of research, with the support of an interpreter to ensure easier communication between the examiner and the child.

### **Measuring instruments**

In order to test the hypotheses, two questionnaires were used, one of which is a questionnaire of predefined variables, which was created for the purposes of this research to measure the independent variables that are investigated in this paper, and concern specific conditions in movement, while the other is a questionnaire of strengths and difficulties of the child, which is an internationally recognized questionnaire with well-founded and researched psychometric characteristics.

The questionnaire of predefined variables includes the age of leaving the country of origin, the length of travel, the length of stay in BiH, the type of accommodation of unaccompanied minors (category 1 – outdoor stay, category 2 – accommodation with up to 3 social services, category 3 – accommodation with more than 3 social services) and the presence of a significant adult.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ – R. Goodman, 1997) is intended for the assessment and self-assessment of emotional and behavioral problems of children and adolescents. In addition to difficulties, the questionnaire is also aimed at assessing the child's strengths.

The questionnaire consists of 25 questions that are grouped into 5 subscales:

- Emotional symptoms
- Behavioral problems
- Hyperactivity/Inattention
- Difficulties in relationships with peers
- Prosocial (well-intentioned) behavior

"Partially true" is always scored with a value of 1, and scoring "false" and "completely true" with a value of 0 and 2, except for the reverse scales, where "false" is scored with a value of 2, and "completely true" with a value of 0. This is true for the particles "I usually do what I'm told", "I think before I do something", "What I start I finish to the end", "I have at least one good friend", "My peers generally like me". The total result of the difficulties is obtained by summing up the results of all categories except the category of attitude towards society (prosocial behavior). The result obtained can range from 0 to 40 and is considered unstable if there are no results of one of the categories, with higher scores indicating more pronounced difficulties for the subject..

## Data processing methods

The data were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). For the purpose of answering the research questions, the following data processing methods were used: correlation analysis, multiple linear regression analysis with subsequent tests.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Time spent on the move refers to the duration of the journey from the country of origin to the current place of residence. This variable can involve a variety of challenges, such as insecurity, lack of basic needs, and ongoing stress. Prolonged time spent on the move can have cumulative negative effects on children's mental health, potentially increasing the risk of emotional and behavioral problems. The results on the questionnaire that estimated time spent on the move, expressed in months, were transcoded into seven categories for easier statistical processing as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Category values on the variable "Time Spent on the Move"

| Category       | 1   | 2      | 3       | 4       | 5       | 6       | 7    |
|----------------|-----|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|
| Range (months) | < 6 | 7 – 12 | 12 – 18 | 19 – 24 | 24 – 30 | 30 – 36 | > 36 |

Time spent in BiH refers to the length of stay in the host country, where unaccompanied minors experience new cultural, educational and social conditions. A longer stay can provide an opportunity for better integration and adaptation, but it can also bring challenges related to long-term migration status and insecurity. Here, too, the results of the questionnaire that estimated the time spent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, expressed in months, were recoded into a new variable to facilitate statistical processing (Table 3). The ranges are determined differently to ensure sensitivity to discrete differences in time spent in BiH, as it is significantly less than the total time spent on the move.

**Table 3.** Category values on the variable "Time spent in BiH"

| Category       | 1   | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6      | 7    |
|----------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|
| Range (months) | < 1 | 1 - 2 | 3 – 4 | 5 - 6 | 6 – 9 | 9 – 12 | > 12 |

The results of the correlation analysis show how the time spent on the move and the time spent in BiH affect the assessment of strengths and difficulties in unaccompanied minors are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Corrality of time variables with SDQ questionnaire categories

|                                                  | Time spent on the move | Weather in BiH |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Category of emotional symptoms                   | 0.30**                 | -0.22          |
| Category of behavioral problems                  | 0.26*                  | -0.18          |
| Category of hyperactivity                        | 0.18                   | -0.21          |
| Category of problems in relationships with peers | 0.27*                  | -0.29*         |
| Category of attitude towards society             | 0.09                   | 0.14           |
| SDQ Overall Score                                | 0.30**                 | -0.28*         |

**Note:** \*\* The correlation is significant at the p level < 0.01. \* The correlation is significant at the p level < 0.05.

Longer time spent in motion is positively correlated with an increase in emotional symptoms ( $\rho = 0.30$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ), behavioral problems ( $\rho = 0.26$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), problems in relationships with peers ( $\rho = 0.27$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ) and overall SDQ score ( $\rho = 0.30$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). These correlations suggest that a longer duration of the migration process (transit) may increase psychosocial difficulties in children.

These findings follow most of the research in this population, including a study conducted in Greece that showed that the length of stay in transit has a significant impact on the mental health of unaccompanied minors. Those who have spent an extended period of time in transit conditions often experience higher levels of psychological stress and mental health problems due to precarious and unstable living conditions during migration (Kallinikaki, 2023).

Longitudinal studies indicate that prolonged stay in transit can worsen the mental health of unaccompanied minors, especially due to exposure to violence, lack of basic services and insecurity. These difficulties can persist even after they arrive in the host country, negatively affecting their ability to adapt and recover (Vervliet et al. 2014).

#### *Time spent in BiH*

Longer time spent in BiH is negatively correlated with problems in relationships with peers ( $\rho = -0.29$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ) and overall SDQ score ( $\rho = -0.28$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), suggesting that a longer stay in the host country may reduce these difficulties. There is no statistically significant correlation with emotional symptoms, behavioral problems, hyperactivity, and social relationships.

These findings highlight the importance of the duration of the migration process and the length of stay in the host country for the psychosocial health of children with migration experience. Spending more time on the move can increase stress and emotional problems, while staying in a stable environment for longer periods of time can help reduce psychosocial difficulties.

These findings are consistent with a study by Keles et al. (2018) who followed more than 900 unaccompanied minors in Norway for four years and found that staying in the country for at least four years was associated with higher scores on the cultural competence construct, and cultural competence was associated with increased resilience over time. Interestingly, interviews with thirty-two unaccompanied minors from different countries in Ireland revealed that being able to continue religious practice in Ireland, and meeting people from their own cultures in Ireland, including sharing their own language, food, and films from their homeland, facilitated the acculturation process (Ní Raghallaigh, Sirriyeh, 2015). In addition,

the acceptance of aspects of local cultures, such as language or styles of dress, allows the development of this bicultural identity (Miller Kerlow-Myers, 2009).

In general, for unaccompanied minors, acculturation is best achieved by maintaining a continuous connection with one's own culture, as well as embracing the local culture. This process seems to facilitate the passage of time, as well as local and individual resources.

After testing the model, statistically significant data ( $F=11.48$ ;  $p = 0.006$ ) were obtained with a mean influence of the independent variable on the overall SDQ score.

**Table 5.** Model summary

|                | <i>R</i> | <i>R square</i> | <i>R square fixed</i> | <i>Standard Error</i> |
|----------------|----------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Model 1</i> | 0.51     | 0.26            | 0.20                  | 8.78                  |

**Predictors:** (Constant), Time in BiH category, Time spent on the move category

Using the Chadock scale of determination, it can be concluded that this model is less representative and that the relationships between the examined variables are moderately strong, i.e. that the independent variables have a weaker effect on the overall SDQ score ( $R^2 = 0.26$ ). This coefficient of determination indicates that only 26% of the studied population can be explained by this model.

**Table 6.** Significance coefficients for the overall SDQ score

|                                   | <i>B</i> | <i>SG</i> | $\beta$ | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|----------|
| (Constant)                        | 15.41    | 2.39      |         | 6.45     | 0,000    |
| Time spent on the move categories | 1.73     | 0.55      | 0.36    | 3.16     | 0,002    |
| Weather in BiH category           | -2.18    | 1.21      | -0.21   | -1.80    | 0,076    |

Time spent in motion has a positive and statistically significant impact on the overall SDQ score ( $B = 1.73$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). This coefficient indicates that for each additional step in the category of time spent on the move, the total SDQ score increases by 1.73 units. This moderately strong correlation suggests that longer time spent on the move increases psychosocial problems in migrant children. Children who have been in the migration process for a longer period of time are likely to experience more stress, uncertainty and traumatic experiences, which is reflected in their mental health.

Mental health problems were found to be more common among unaccompanied minors compared to accompanied minors, for example with a prevalence difference of 28 percent in a German study (Muller et al., 2019). This means that health screenings for these minors should take into account these issues, as well as the increased risks of sexual abuse, violence, and human trafficking to which these minors are exposed. Many situations related to forced migration - such as violence, unstable or scarce living conditions, lack of education - negatively affect the health of these children and adolescents.

Time spent in BiH has a negative, but not entirely significant impact on the overall SDQ score ( $B = -2.18$ ,  $p = 0.076$ ). This coefficient indicates that for each additional step in the category of time spent in BiH, the total SDQ score decreases by 2.18 units. While this impact is not significant enough to be confirmed, it suggests that a longer stay in BiH could reduce psychosocial problems in unaccompanied minors. This moderately strong negative

correlation may indicate that a longer stay allows children to better adapt and integrate into the new environment, which has a positive effect on their mental health.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is focused on the assessment of the strengths and difficulties of unaccompanied minors in relation to specific conditions on the move. When it comes to the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is still no serious approach to this problem, and there is still rare research on the issue of the migrant population as well as specific difficulties and behavioral disorders in this population. Therefore, this research was done with the aim of contributing to shedding light on the issue in this area.

The main objective of the research was to investigate the correlation between the strengths and difficulties of unaccompanied minors in relation to variables such as the age of leaving the home country, the length of the journey and the country of origin, in search and identification for certain specific factors that can serve as protective or risk factors in their lives. Also, the research aims to determine how length of stay within the BiH system towards unaccompanied minors affect the self-assessment of the strengths and difficulties of unaccompanied minors.

The research was conducted with unaccompanied minors residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina accommodated in support systems such as temporary reception centers, a center for children and youth, safe houses, but also unaccompanied minors who sleep in the open. The study included 75 unaccompanied minors. The research was conducted during 2023, and several key conclusions emerge from the conducted research.

The results of the research clearly show that the longer the duration of the migration process has a negative impact on the psychosocial outcomes of minors. Children who spend a long time in uncertainty and uncertainty during migration are more likely to report emotional, behavioral and relationship problems. This points to the need for accelerated reception, identification and integration processes in order to reduce the negative impacts of prolonged migration. Particular attention should be paid to speeding up administrative procedures and ensuring stable accommodation and support as soon as possible.

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