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Antonio Parrinello/Reuters



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Horror Stories 05.22.15 5:25 AM ET

Why Is No One Looking for These 5,000 Missing Kids?

Among the many thousands of migrants and refugees trying to make it to Europe, as many as two-thirds of the children are unaccompanied: easy pickings for organized crime.

ROME — There are almost 5,000 missing children in Italy right now, and no one is looking for them. Their photos aren't posted on the Internet, and there are no Amber Alerts notifying the general public to keep a look out for them. They are nameless statistics, identified only by the identification number bracelets given to them after they were rescued at sea.

The missing are unaccompanied minors, many of whom survived untold horrors for most of their lives before arriving in Italy on smugglers' boats from Libya. According to Italy's Foreign Ministry, 4,840 have simply disappeared from the reception centers across the country since last summer.

The lucky ones, if you can call them that, presumably met family members who were here waiting for them. Others have been sucked into Italy's dark underworld and are victims of sex trafficking, labor exploitation, or other unimaginable fates.

“The hope we have is that children end up with family members who are already here,” Equality Now trafficking consultant Esohe Aghatise told The Daily Beast. “But the reality is that many end up in the sex trade or exploited in other ways.”

Aghatise, a Nigerian-born lawyer who came to Italy on a scholarship 23 years ago, got involved helping victims of trafficking when local police roped her in to help as an interpreter dealing with Nigerian prostitutes as they first started working the Italian streets in the early 1990s. Now, she says there are as many as 20,000 Nigerian sex workers in Italy, which makes up the vast majority in the country. Some, she says, are as young as 12 years old.

Sex trafficking is such a major problem in Italy that the city of Rome is [debating legislation](#) that could give the capital designated red light districts and legal brothels, which Aghatise says will just make the government complicit in trafficking of illegal migrants. “If you decriminalize prostitution, there will be more of a demand for it,” she says. “Prostitution is the product of trafficking and if you make it easier, more young people will become victims.”

But Nigerians are not the only minors who are lost. Many other sub-Saharan and North Africans children end up exploited on what Italy’s Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has called a “modern slave market.”

Many boys and young men are picked up outside the migrant reception centers in Italy and enticed to work in the agricultural sector for a meager wage that they are led to believe will help them earn enough money to move on, according to a recent report by Italy’s labor ministry that predicted an escalation of sex and labor trafficking in 2015.

In practice, the boys end up having to pay room and board and transportation costs, which keeps them locked into spiraling poverty they have little hope of escaping. Some who do manage to get out of the fields are picked up by local crime syndicates to be drug runners and petty criminals.

Children often arrive with a focused goal in mind. Last Sunday, three Eritrean boys thought to be around 12 or 13 years old were picked up walking along a busy section of highway near Pisa. They still had their identification bracelets on, but the only word they knew in Italian was “Germania,” indicating that they were headed to Germany, according to Grazia Sestini, the regional supervisor for minors in Tuscany.

“Behind these kids there is an adult who is pulling the strings,” she says. “In the past, boys were found on trains without papers but with a ticket to Germany that definitely an adult had put in their pocket. It’s hard not to think that behind these incidents there is a strong organization that is hiding child trafficking.” Have some of the disappeared made it to safe family homes in Northern Europe? There’s no way of knowing.

Save The Children’s global media manager, Natasha Dos Santos, says that two out of three children arriving in Italy by boat are unaccompanied. She says the majority are hoping to reunite with family members in other parts of Europe and that even the youngest unaccompanied minors are told what to do and who to call when they arrive.

“These children are incredibly vulnerable to exploitation and extortion,” says Dos Santos. “They are instructed to work with trafficking rings to get them as close to their families as possible, but when they arrive they often just leave and try to make that journey on their own.”

That journey often includes making a call to an unknown trafficker who gives them instructions and who, in turn, arranges the payment with an adult family member or someone who may well have sinister intentions for the child.

Because most of Italy’s centers dedicated to minors are already filled to capacity, many pre-teens and teenagers end up staying at centers for adults, where they melt into the adult population and are allowed to leave the unlocked centers for several hours a day. Many of the migrant reception centers are not gated, and those that are almost always allow migrants to leave for several hours a day. Roll call is generally taken at mealtime, when most migrants return to eat. If they don’t return for several days in a row, they are considered missing, which translates primarily as a new vacancy for another migrant. Searches are rare, even for minors.

In accordance with Italian law, all unaccompanied minors who arrive in the country have an automatic right to stay, but because the system is so over-extended, not all are moved to adequate children centers or given foster care. And because of the bureaucratic overload in processing applications, many end up waiting months or years to be legally reunited with family members.

“Often the children feel they can’t wait for reunification to happen through official channels,” Dos Santos says. “Instead they will take the chance and risk it, working through networks of people they know to try to reach their final destinations.”

The tragedy of these missing migrant children is not about to get better anytime soon. At the current rate, as many as 300,000 migrants could reach Italian shores by the end of the year, among them an increasing number of unaccompanied minors who could just disappear without a trace, almost as if they never existed at all.