

Introduction

Creating New Futures

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1 Children in search of refuge

The phenomenon of children and young persons displaced by the catastrophes of war, famine or other misfortune is an unhappy constant in human history. This book has been written at a time when there are as many children on the move as forced migrants as at any time in human history. In its *Global Trends Report* for 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that the number of people on the move as refugees or other ‘persons of concern’ was the highest ever recorded, with 59.5 million individuals displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, generalised violence or human rights violations (UNHCR, 2015, 2). Where data was available disaggregated by age (for some 9 million refugees), 51 per cent were identified as children aged 17 years or less. The average percentage of children within particular refugee populations ranged from 58 per cent in East and Horn of Africa to 24 per cent in the Americas (ibid, 41). Such statistics do not begin to present anything like a complete picture of what is occurring. For example, UNHCR’s figures do not include the United States, where unprecedented numbers of children crossed the southern border in search of protection or a better life in 2013-2014. Among the major refugee-hosting countries, Egypt, Niger, South Sudan, Syria and Uganda stand out, with children making up more than 60 per cent of the population of displaced persons (ibid).

Historically, most of Australia’s children and young persons from refugee backgrounds have entered the country through organised ‘resettlement’ programs rather than as asylum seekers (see the third section of this Introduction, below). This reality has meant that processes put in place to receive and settle young refugees have traditionally been regarded as very separate from the asylum process. In

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