

WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

An Urgent Child Protection Brief Following the June 24 Earthquake in Venezuela

Executive Summary

The devastating earthquake that struck Venezuela on June 24 has created a second humanitarian emergency that extends far beyond search and rescue operations.

It is now a child protection emergency.

Tonight, somewhere in Venezuela, there are children who survived the earthquake... but whose families still don't know where they are.

An estimated 3.9 million children live in the areas affected by the powerful 7.5 and 7.2 magnitude **earthquakes that struck Venezuela** on 24 June, putting **thousands of children and families at risk.**

UNICEF is on the ground and remains committed to supporting national efforts to address the needs of affected children and their families, particularly the most vulnerable.

unicef  for every child



People run into a street following the earthquake in Caracas on Wednesday.



In the hours and days ahead, **children** will need **protection, psychosocial support, safe water, healthcare and safe spaces.**

As rescue efforts continue, an unknown number of children have become separated from their parents and caregivers during evacuation, hospitalization, displacement, and emergency response operations.

At this time, there is **no publicly available centralized system** identifying how many children remain separated, where they are, who has temporary responsibility for their care, or how family reunification is being coordinated.

This lack of transparency is not simply an administrative gap.

This has become an urgent child protection crisis.

One Question Still Has No Answer

Where are the children?

How many remain separated from their families?

How many have been identified?

How many have already been reunited?

We simply do not know.

Until those questions can be answered, every separated child remains at greater risk.

Why This Matters

Around the world, major disasters consistently create conditions that place separated children at significantly greater risk of:

- Human trafficking
- Illegal adoption
- Exploitation
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Prolonged family separation

When children cannot be identified, tracked, and safely reunited with their families, they become invisible.

Invisible children are vulnerable children.

The most effective way to prevent child trafficking after a disaster is to ensure that no child ever becomes untraceable.

Venezuela has experienced this vulnerability before.

Following the 1999 Vargas disaster, numerous families reported children believed to have survived rescue operations but who were never reunited with their relatives. Many of those cases remain unresolved decades later.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding those disappearances, they remind us of a fundamental lesson:

When disasters occur without transparent systems for identifying, documenting, tracking, and reuniting separated children, uncertainty itself becomes a child protection risk.

That lesson is just as relevant today.

This Is a Different Kind of Emergency

Venezuela's child protection system was designed to respond to **individual cases** in which a child must be protected from abuse, neglect, abandonment, exploitation, or other violations of their rights.

Under this framework, Child Protection Councils evaluate each case individually and adopt specific protection measures based on the child's best interests.

This emergency is fundamentally different.

These children have **not** been removed from unsafe families.

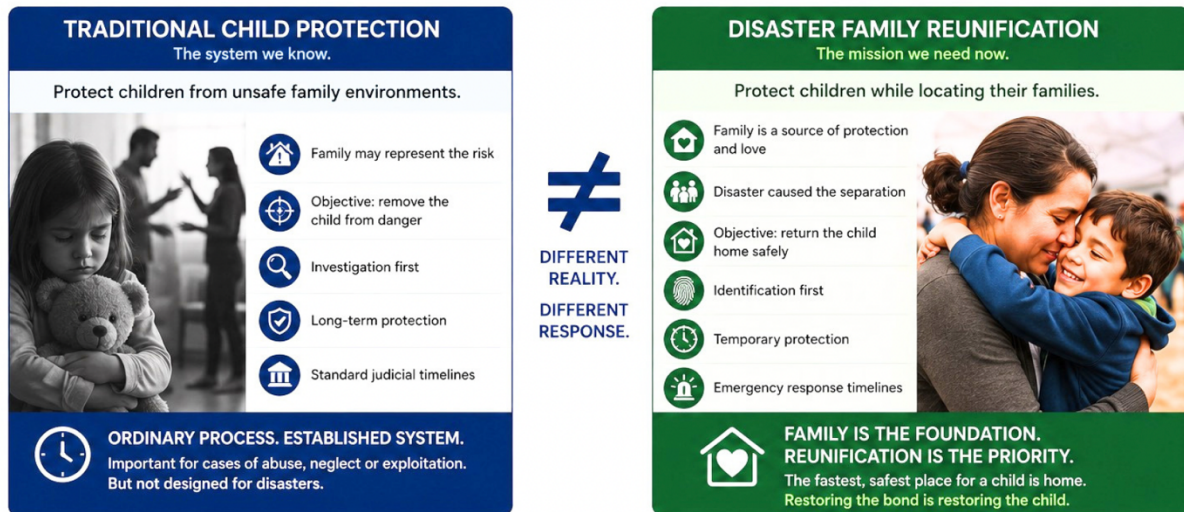
They have been involuntarily separated from their parents and caregivers by a natural disaster.

The legal and institutional challenge is therefore not to determine whether a child should remain separated from their family.

Rather, it is to ensure that every separated child is rapidly identified, protected, documented, traced, and safely reunited with their parents or legal caregivers as quickly as possible.

While Venezuela's existing child protection framework provides important legal safeguards, it was **not designed to manage the simultaneous identification, documentation, traceability, and reunification of hundreds or potentially thousands of children affected by a large-scale disaster.**

These are fundamentally different missions requiring fundamentally different operational models.



This unprecedented emergency requires an extraordinary, centralized coordination mechanism capable of managing child protection and family reunification at scale while fully respecting the principles established under Venezuela's legal framework and internationally recognized child protection standards.

Rapid DNA can change everything

Rapid DNA testing has become one of the most effective humanitarian tools available after mass disasters.

It allows children too young to identify themselves—or whose documents have been lost—to be safely reunited with their families within hours or days instead of weeks or months.

Every day without systematic deployment of rapid DNA testing is another day families remain unnecessarily separated.



TIME MATTERS

-  Every **hour** without identification reduces the likelihood of rapid reunification.
-  Every **day** without traceability increases children's exposure to exploitation, trafficking, unnecessary institutionalization, and prolonged family separation.
-  **Rapid DNA testing is no longer an experimental technology.** It is an established humanitarian tool that has been successfully deployed in mass disasters around the world to reunite children with their families quickly and accurately.

 Every child deserves to be found.
Every family deserves to be reunited.

Our Concern Today

We are **not** making allegations regarding the whereabouts of any individual child.

Our concern is much more fundamental.

There is currently no publicly accessible information allowing families, humanitarian organizations, or child protection actors to know:

- How many children have been rescued.
- Where they are currently located.
- Who has temporary responsibility for their care.
- What procedures are being followed to verify family relationships.
- How reunification efforts are being coordinated.

Without these safeguards, children become invisible.

And invisible children face greater risks.

How You Can Help

We are seeking trusted partners to help:

- Bring immediate international visibility to this child protection emergency.
- Mobilize global experts in disaster child protection and family reunification.
- Support the rapid implementation of extraordinary reunification measures, including child identification, family tracing, and rapid DNA capabilities where appropriate.
- Help ensure that no child affected by this disaster becomes invisible.



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No family should have to search for their child *twice.*

 **FIRST** IN THE RUBBLE.

 **THEN** IN THE SYSTEM.

 **EVERY CHILD**
deserves to find their way home.

 **EVERY CHILD**
SHOULD BE ACCOUNTED FOR.

 **EVERY FAMILY**
DESERVES ANSWERS.

 **EVERY CHILD**
DESERVES PROTECTION.

 **EVERY CHILD**
DESERVES TO COME HOME.