



Blue Refugee Center

Paving the way towards successful integration
Overview and Achievements 2016-2021



This is our common ground



What is the Blue Refugee Center?

SolidarityNow in collaboration with the UNHCR and support from UNICEF, established the Blue Refugee Center (BRC) in Thessaloniki in 2016 initially as an emergency response, providing basic information and support to asylum seekers and relocation candidates and gradually transitioning to an integration center for those who remained in Greece. The center is a dynamic space, which adapts itself to respond to the changing needs of the population. Through its continued operation from 2016 to 2021, the BRC has become a hub for organisations and a reference point for the target population, drawing in people living in and around Thessaloniki centre. The BRC is a space where individuals can access services, participate in classes and activities, and spend some time in a safe and friendly environment.

Offering a comprehensive set of integration and protection services:

- Internet corner - for access services and trainings, contacting friends and family and searching for employment
- Child Friendly Space - recreational and socio-emotional learning activities
- Female Friendly Space - empowerment and targeted activities for women
- Accommodation – through the ESTIA programme
- Cultural mediation - interpretation and mediation
- Accountant Services - tax declarations, welfare benefits
- Information provision - through helpline, targeted sessions, and wide dissemination
- Psychosocial support - individual and group sessions
- Legal counselling and representation
- Employability services - empowerment, training, and matching with employers
- Non-formal education (language & school support) and recreational activities
- Language lessons for adults - Greek, English and other European languages
- Community engagement - activities bringing beneficiaries and communities together

The Blue Refugee Center has supported **12,500** individuals through **61,186** sessions and activities, while the total visitation surpassed **100,000**.

Status of BRC beneficiaries

Country of Origin, Accommodation Status and Age Distribution

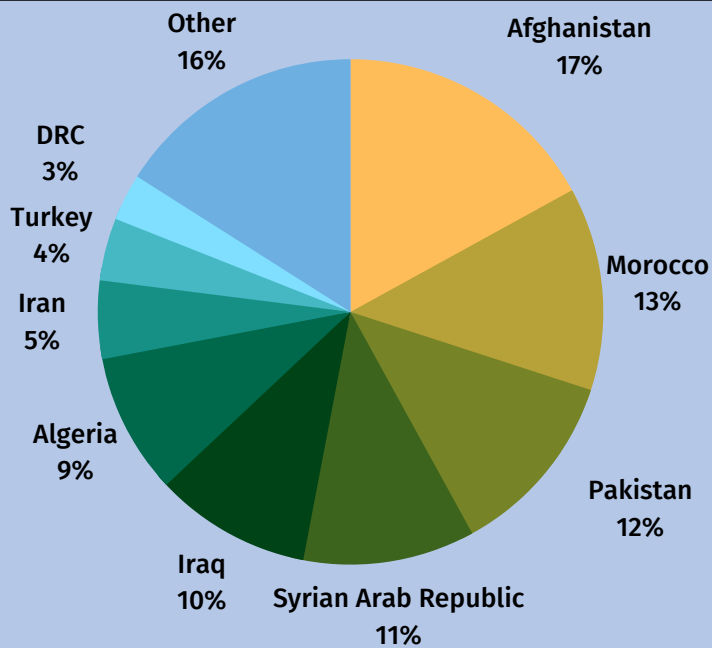


Figure 1: Country of origin of BRC beneficiaries

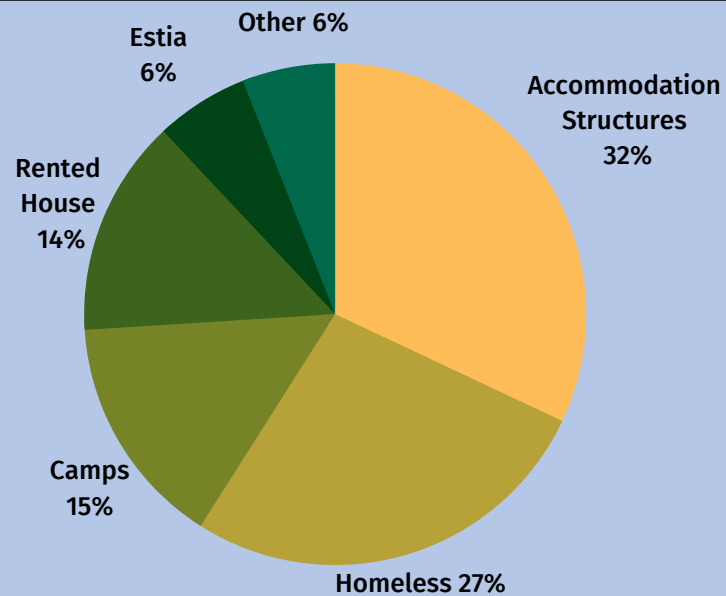


Figure 2: Accommodation status of BRC beneficiaries

Through the BRC, SN has supported beneficiaries from 73 countries across the globe, the eldest being 77, while 2,074 were women. Regarding their legal status, most beneficiaries were asylum seekers (65%), but a notable 1,263 were undocumented, while 27% were homeless.

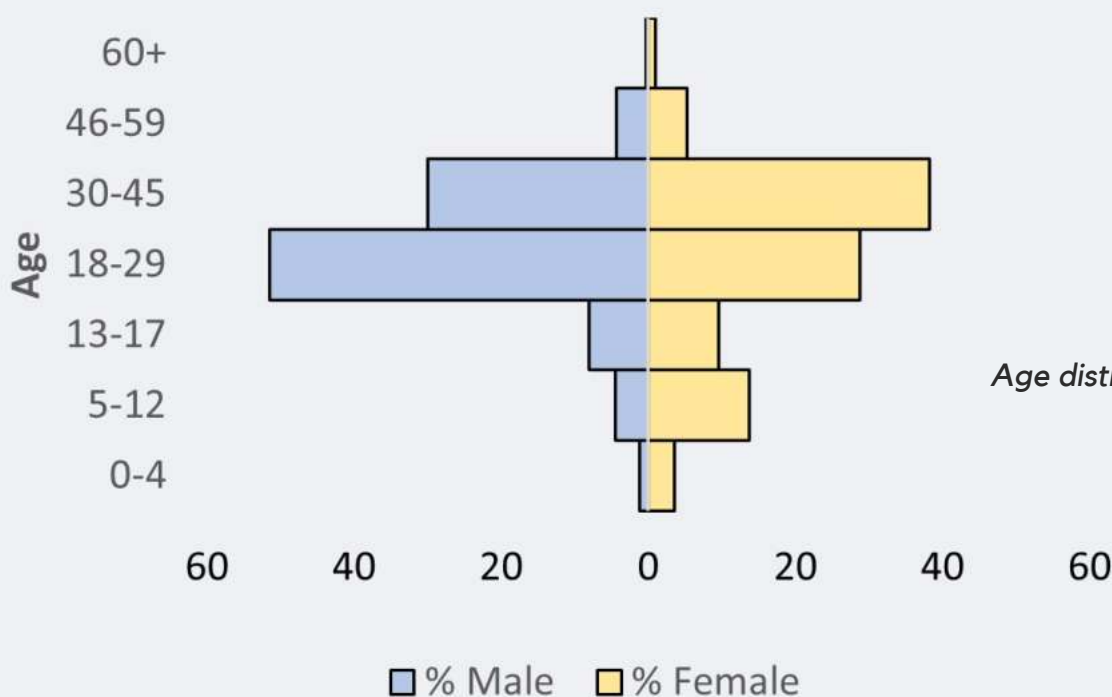


Figure 3:
Age distribution of BRC beneficiaries



Employability Services

The Employability Service reached an impressive success rate of 44% (280 jobs) in 2021, demonstrating the necessary learning process required to improve a programme impact. By the end of 2021, the service had established a network of more than 80 employers, continuously reaching out for new job opportunities.

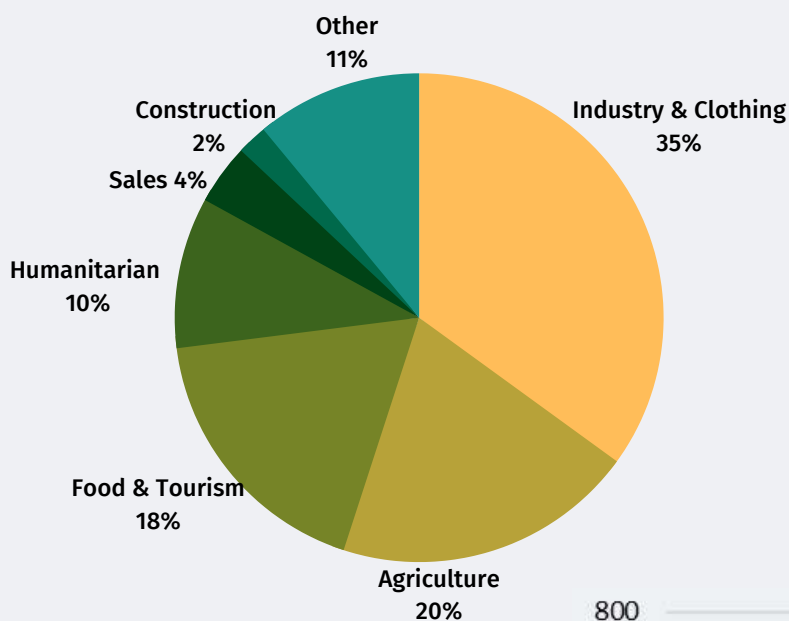
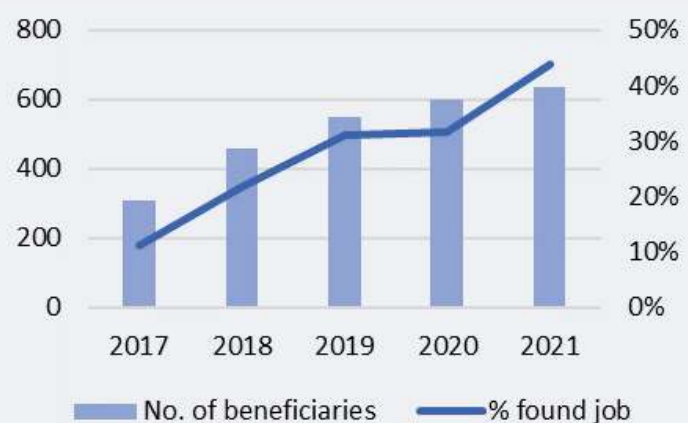


Figure 4: Indicative sectoral breakdown

Figure 5: BRC employability service beneficiaries and jobs found



Legal Services

Of those seeking Legal Services, 75% related to refugee law. However, the BRC also supported cases of administrative law, penal, family, civil and labour law. The BRC was one of the few locations where third-country nationals could access free legal services and interpretation in the city and supported particularly vulnerable individuals including unaccompanied minors and undocumented.

Through the BRC, SN has been able to continuously map the needs of the population, identify contextual changes and priorities as well as cases of pushbacks, requiring further escalation.



Notable Events

In September 2019, SolidarityNow organised the first job fair for refugees and migrants in Thessaloniki. The event brought together people looking for employment, companies, and NGOs to discuss labour issues and identify employment opportunities. The event was a great success with 444 participants.





Collaborations

The BRC brings together organisations (national and international) UN organisations, municipal and state actors, educational and training institutions, and beneficiaries to achieve its goal and improve the lives of refugees and asylum seekers, while it was also used as a meeting space for groups and voluntary organisations. Some of the collaborations are outlined below.

- UNHCR - working groups, trainings, focus groups, verification exercises, interviews
- UNICEF - activities, meetings, trainings
- IOM - employability workshops, beneficiary outreach, trainings
- NGOs - A21, Artfactory, ARSIS, CRS, INTERSOS, IFRC, IRC, MdM, NRC, RTI
- Educational - Anatolia College, American Farm School, School of Modern Greek Language
- Other stakeholders - Municipal Development Agency of Thessaloniki, Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, Thess Checkpoint, Thessaloniki Film Festival
- Volunteers - coordination meetings, trainings, info sessions, TEFL courses

The BRC has welcomed multitudes of visitors over the years including Ministers, Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission, UN staff, Ambassadors and Consuls.



BRC Stories

S. I am 16 years old, from Afghanistan and for the last two years I have been living in Germany with my mother and siblings. I escaped from my father and left from Afghanistan with some neighbours when I was very young. In Greece, I found a lady who took care of me as I was scared to live alone. I visited the BRC for classes, games and to pass my time as the house was very small, I immediately felt much better. I used the computers at the BRC to search for my mum and one day I found her! I was initially reluctant to tell my teacher that the person they thought was my mum, wasn't, and that I had now found my family in Germany. However, I trusted her, so I did. I also spoke to the social worker, a lawyer and other staff at the centre and they got in touch with my mum to see whether I could go to Germany to live with my family. The spoke very often with my mum to collect the information and paperwork and we also had to do a saliva test to prove that we were related. At some point they found a space for me at a shelter with other children who didn't have families, and that was much better than where I was living before. When they told me that I would go to Germany, I couldn't believe it. **I can't imagine what my life would have been without my teacher and everyone at the BRC. They all tried so hard for me, I am so grateful to have met them and I thank them very much.**

A. I am 28 from Cameroon and I have two children, one of which is unfortunately not with me. I found out about the BRC in 2019 when I was living at the Mother Theresa shelter. I had been transferred from Moria to Vrasna but I left as the living conditions were terrible and I had a child. At the shelter it wasn't much easier, I didn't feel safe and couldn't think straight. I started seeing a psychologist at the BRC and I was able to discuss the difficulties I had been through. I was distressed about having to go back to the hell that was Moria for the asylum interview. My lawyer at the BRC tried to avoid this, but in the end, I had to go. I didn't have any money to pay for the travel, but the BRC covered these costs and, most importantly, prepared me for the interview so that I could have a clear head and remain calm. I am now renting an apartment with a friend who I met at the shelter, and we are much better. The BRC introduced us to the Naomi centre where we make handicrafts as well as other organisations to support us, access NFIs and food. **We sell the things we make, and we can now dream of a future.**



BRC Stories

T. I am 34 from Burundi. I used to live in Kato Milia, and I really wanted to find a job and leave the camp. I met SN's team at the camp, where they provided Greek lessons, and they informed me about the employability service at the BRC. I didn't think twice! With the Employability Officer, we prepared my CV, I learned how to look for jobs and found the courage to send my CV and go to job interview. Whenever she informed me that there was a job opening, I would immediately go, irrespective of where it was. I was finally invited for an interview at a camping in Chalkidiki and they immediately hired me, I was so happy! I was hired to carry and clean but given my training as a mining engineer, they started to trust me with some repair jobs. While I was there, I found out that my asylum claim was accepted, and I returned to Thessaloniki. With the help of the BRC, I have attended vocational trainings (tourism, food and safety) and found other jobs. During the pandemic, it was difficult to find employment, but the BRC empowered me to continue looking and to improve my Greek, through online classes. I have now started evening school and will finish the 10th grade. I have two jobs and I am always looking for other opportunities, while my priority now is to finish school. **I thank the BRC team as they helped me find a job, stand on my own feet and most importantly, believe in myself once again.**

