



# PERCEPTIONS

## Policy Brief

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## Unaccompanied and Separated Children on the move

### Perceptions of Europe, challenges and potential promising practices

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### Executive Summary

In 2021, the number of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the EU rose by 72 percent compared to the previous year. Against the backdrop of the Taliban rising to power in Afghanistan, many refugees fled the country, among which unaccompanied or separated children represented a significant proportion. This trend is not unique to Afghanistan, as many children fleeing wars, conflicts or simply on the move, find themselves in countries of first arrival in the EU and confronted by a number of challenges that were not foreseen.

Based on research conducted at the end of 2021, including expert interviews conducted in Morocco, Italy, the UK and at the EU level, this policy brief looks at:

- The perceptions of Europe, and of specific European countries, held by unaccompanied and separated children;
- The challenges they encounter along their migration journey and in countries of settlement,
- Good practices addressing challenges facing unaccompanied minors, as identified by experts.

Policy recommendations in this brief address the main challenges identified in relation to differing perceptions of Europe, and diverging practices vis-à-vis “minors”, namely the need for a harmonised approach when dealing with unaccompanied children.

## Introduction

Perceptions of Europe contribute to building narratives of Europe and feed into migration aspirations of prospective migrants. Aspirations to migrate and perceptions of countries of destination vary across different groups, one of which are unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). The perspectives of and relevance of children (and particularly unaccompanied and separated children) for recent migratory flows to Europe emerged from the research as an important aspect in some countries, in Europe as well as outside of Europe. In 2020, the majority of children arriving to the EU were unaccompanied or separated<sup>1</sup>. The number of applications by unaccompanied minors peaked in December 2021, and Afghan minors made up by far the largest group of UASC, with nearly half of all applications lodged for this particular group. Worth noting is that every 1 in 7 Afghan asylum seeker is a minor<sup>2</sup>. Even more relevant to highlight is the need to understand the specific drivers for migration of unaccompanied children, their perceptions of Europe and specific countries, some described as more welcoming of young migrants and others as hostile, and the particular threats they face along their journeys. This policy brief will also highlight some relevant good practices identified by a number of experts interviewed in the context of the PERCEPTIONS project<sup>1</sup>.

### Definition:

**UASC** refers to children (under the age of 18) who either arrive or are left on the territory of an EU Member unaccompanied by the adult responsible for them by law or by the practice of the EU Member State concerned, and for as long as they are not effectively taken into the care of such a person. Other common terms used are: unaccompanied minors, UAM, and unaccompanied and separated children, UASC. See: (UNHCR, 2004).

## Perceptions held by unaccompanied children and migration decisions

Perceptions held by unaccompanied children are important in understanding migration decision-making as they feed into migration trajectories. Based on interviews, stakeholders working on these issues in the EU highlighted that unaccompanied children seem to have a preference for two main host countries, namely **Germany and Sweden**, to reach as the final country of destination and settlement. The attractiveness of these countries compared to others is mainly due to a favourable perception of child protection and integration policies compared to other (European) countries. This relates to perceptions of reception and integration conditions, as well as access to services and support.

Another important factor specific to unaccompanied children is the importance of the presence of a **peer network** throughout their journey. Beyond family ties, acquaintances and communities in host countries, it seems that peers, who are also unaccompanied children, can also influence where unaccompanied children migrate. Unaccompanied children who have been in

### Key Findings:

- **Within the EU, Germany and Sweden** are the preferred countries of destination of UASC.
- Among the specific factors affecting unaccompanied children's decisions to migrate and preferences for countries of settlement, **peer networks** were highlighted as particularly relevant for this group, both in terms

<sup>1</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/87693>

<sup>2</sup> <https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-asylum>

contact with each other during the initial stages of the migration journey form strong bonds with each other and create an important support system that guides secondary movements later on. Many of these children reportedly stay in contact **via online platforms**, including instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp. They provide each other with useful information on the journey and living conditions in countries of transit and destination, in a way that can influence others' perceptions and migration decisions. As highlighted through interviews, the role of this peer network is particularly important for unaccompanied children on the move as it strongly drives migration decisions and occupies a much bigger importance in their lives and journeys than for other migrant groups.

Decisions on countries of destination by unaccompanied children have also been linked by stakeholders interviewed to **host communities' perceptions of unaccompanied children**. Decision-making by unaccompanied children during transit and after arrival are influenced by several factors including how welcoming and open local communities are towards migrants, and the size and management of reception centres for minors, as it was reported in a focus group discussion in Italy. In Spain, the negative campaign against unaccompanied minors by the VOX political party contributes to forming and further anchoring negative perceptions of foreign minors in Spain as a source of criminality.

Unaccompanied children are also confronted with **mismatches between their expectations of their journeys and countries of destination and the reality upon arrival**. In Italy, stakeholders interviewed referred to this realisation as a sense of **disappointment and disillusionment** on their arrival to the country around reception conditions and access to different services, financial resources and support. Many of the unaccompanied children arriving to Italy from sub-Saharan Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh arrive with what was described by stakeholders as simplified images of life in Italy. Stakeholders considered that these perceptions had been formed in countries of origin through family, friends and other social networks.

## Challenges for unaccompanied children

Unaccompanied children in countries of origin, transit, and destination are often exposed to a wide range of threats, not only resulting from their individual vulnerabilities but from the legal, economic and social circumstances in which they find themselves.

In countries of **origin such as in Morocco**, many Moroccan children who end up migrating are offered very few opportunities in their country and are considered **"forgotten" by the state and their communities**. Although there are funds dedicated to child protection for young Moroccans, the child protection system has yet to make use of them, according to stakeholders interviewed on the subject. The issue of the "forgotten" Moroccan children is

*of information provided and as support in migrants' experiences navigating new settings.*

- **Other factors include host communities' perceptions and attitudes towards unaccompanied children.**

- *In countries of origin, lack of support and economic opportunities, in addition to school dropout and marginalisation lead children to aspire to migrate.*

- *In Europe, a critical juncture for unaccompanied minors that represents a threat is the transition to adulthood and loss of*



further compounded by the living conditions of many of them. One of the main drivers for unaccompanied Moroccan children migrating is the **high unemployment rate in the country and the rising school dropout rate, in addition to substance abuse, criminality in poor neighbourhoods, and lack of psychosocial support to these vulnerable communities.** By contrast, migration is seen as a means to leave the lack of opportunities, care, and future prospects, with Europe framed as a place of realisation of these aspirations.

The negative narrative often present in some media and public discourse about unaccompanied children and young migrant men and their subsequent stigmatisation is another important challenge for unaccompanied children in countries of transit and destination. This was particularly the case in Spain, where a far-right political party led a campaign negatively depicting unaccompanied children.

One of the biggest threats faced by unaccompanied children in Europe is related to **their transition to adulthood and loss of access to specific support and services.** Several aspects of this transition are affected, including housing, but also legal status. Depending on the country of arrival or settlement, unaccompanied minors might find themselves without a residence status on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, hence becoming undocumented adults or undocumented asylum-seeking adults and losing the rights provided by the state overnight. As migrant children, they are entitled to education, training, housing rights and guardianship, and their abrupt shift to adulthood can be jarring for many, with many subsequently experiencing homelessness and other forms of insecurity.

Significantly, considering the nature of their “unaccompanied or separated” status, the **lack of a support network** is a challenge for unaccompanied and separated children on the move. This affects their security and wellbeing and could expose them to exploitation, physical violence or becoming victims of trafficking. The lack of support networks leads unaccompanied and separated children on the move to becoming vulnerable to deception by smugglers and traffickers, who in turn can affect their perceptions of Europe and their future living conditions.

Another challenge highlighted relates to how the state perceives unaccompanied children, and the ways in which the state documents them as such. The use of **age assessments** by state actors is central to the ongoing discussions on unaccompanied and separated children at the moment and feeds into potential challenges experienced by unaccompanied migrant children who are perceived as adults. **The lack of consistency across the EU and the arbitrariness of this method** undermines children’s rights and their access to adequate living conditions. The process itself can be disrespectful to children and their dignity, which affects their wellbeing. The inaccuracy and ethically questionable approaches to age assessments adds to another issue that requires further attention, which is the **administrative backlog in age assessments that greatly affects the outcome of legal decisions for many minors.** For unaccompanied children who arrived to Europe at age 17, the

*access to support and services.*

delay in the age assessment procedures means that many are still awaiting a decision on their asylum or residence applications when they turn 18, which in turn (negatively) affects the outcome of their claim.

## “Survival crime” and reframing criminality of migrant children

Many of the factors mentioned previously, namely unaccompanied children’s **vulnerabilities, as well as the lack of a support system while on the move or in countries of destination**, mean that some find themselves engaging in criminal activities in order to survive. This challenge, although seen by some stakeholders, including political parties and media outlets as a “threat” to communities and the state, is also a challenge to these minors. According to stakeholders interviewed, it is important to highlight that many unaccompanied children are **exposed to criminality but do not engage** in these activities. Those who end up having a criminal record are often victims of their circumstances and the **failures of inadequate protection systems** that push them towards petty crime and “survival” crime.

It is worth highlighting that, although criminality among migrants, including unaccompanied children, was highlighted as an important challenge by stakeholders, the link between security threats broadly and perceptions of Europe was contested. Instances of unaccompanied children engaging in criminal activities remains anecdotal. However, narratives around migrant children committing crimes and representing a threat to society are not uncommon. These narratives represent a threat to unaccompanied children in countries of transit and destination as they contribute to **creating a negative perception of young migrants and adds to tensions and hostilities with the local populations**.

## Promising practices to address challenges

Perceptions of and challenges to unaccompanied children were also investigated in order to gain some insights into potential promising practices. Unaccompanied children face many obstacles in host countries, which are further complicated by the stigma they face in many contexts, where they are seen as inherently delinquent and predisposed to criminality. The need to support the integration of children in host communities is therefore central in preventing the threats outlined above.

Below are some of the promising practices highlighted by stakeholders as contributing to better outcomes for unaccompanied children:

- **Spanish Royal Decree 903/2021:** In October 2021, the Spanish government adopted a decree facilitating access to residence and work permits for unaccompanied children turning 18. The reform is expected to benefit 15,000 people, of which 8,000 unaccompanied children and 7,000 adults who have aged out but arrived as minors.

- *Stigmatisation of unaccompanied children in countries of transit and destination is one of the main challenges affecting UASC.*

- **The Italian “Zampa law”:** Enacted in 2017, this law has several provisions targeting unaccompanied children, including access to the Italian National Health Service during their time in Italy, and admission to educational institutions. They also have a right to be informed about legal representation, which should be provided free of charge, funded by the state. The Zampa law amends and introduces procedures for family reunification, provision of residency permits, and various forms of other social assistance. The law also allows for the creation of a national information system, which is designed to keep track of unaccompanied children in Italy, including their location and specific individual needs.
- Missing Children Europe is an NGO with an initial focus on children going missing. They developed the **Miniila app** with their national level partners and members to inform children, particularly unaccompanied children, of their rights, opportunities and access to services in several countries. The app provides necessary and reliable access to service providers to children on the move.

These promising practices provide examples of areas in which policymakers and practitioners can concretely engage to counter the challenges faced by unaccompanied and separated children, highlighted previously. As highlighted, many of the challenges facing migrant children relate to the legislation governing their rights, access to protection, and their transition to adulthood. Therefore, efforts in changing laws at the national level are needed to improve their situations and help them better integrate and navigate their new countries of settlement.

## ● Recommendations

The good practices highlighted above point to many areas of improvement of child protection systems in EU and non-EU countries. The initiatives of the Spanish and Italian legislators are important steps towards a more holistic approach in ensuring adequate access to services and support by unaccompanied and separated children. More importantly, this approach should be applied consistently across EU countries and a call for harmonisation is important in addressing the diverging practices and approaches in integrating unaccompanied children. The specificities of children’s needs while on the move or in countries of settlement calls for a child-sensitive approach when dealing with asylum and migration policies and measures. Additionally, as the research has demonstrated, narratives on unaccompanied and separated children in countries of transit and destination influence how they are perceived in host communities and to some extent their integration outcomes. Therefore, more efforts should be made in engaging and promoting narratives that promote social cohesion.

### Key recommendation:

- *A harmonized approach across the EU is needed in dealing with unaccompanied and separated children. This applies to age assessment practices, access to support and services, and transition to adulthood.*



## At the EU level:

- The use of **some age assessment procedures** to estimate the “accurate” age of minors has been deemed unethical and problematic by many institutions and CSOs advocating for migrants and children’s rights. Instead, there should be a harmonised approach across the EU, and further engagement of FRA, the EUAA and other agencies in developing standards that are in line with good practices promoted by PICUM and other advocacy actors.
- Given the previously large numbers of unaccompanied and separated children arriving to the EU in the aftermath of the Taliban rule of Afghanistan, the EUAA should account for the challenges highlighted in their **monitoring and bring awareness to new trends** to the member states to take the necessary approaches.

## At the national level:

- **Narratives** of unaccompanied and separated children are central in ensuring social cohesion and improving their integration outcomes. Government institutions should engage with **national media outlets and other platforms** to prevent hostile and misleading campaigns against migrant groups and particularly unaccompanied children. There is a need for information campaigns that promote for positive narratives around unaccompanied and separated children.
- The issue of institutions’ capacities in processing asylum claims is not specific to unaccompanied and separated children. However, the backlog of claims that need to be processed is time-sensitive in the case of children awaiting decisions, particularly when they are of schooling age and when these decisions are tied to their age. Therefore, more efforts should be made to **mainstream and fast-track asylum applications processing in the case of unaccompanied children** and prevent backlogs.
- Law enforcement actors’ engagement with unaccompanied and separated children should allow for a **child-sensitive and differentiated approach and bring awareness and prevent pre-existing bias** against this group.

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## ○ Websites

[www.perceptions.eu](http://www.perceptions.eu)

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## ○ Deliverables

Ben Brahim, N., Hendow, M., (2021). Deliverable 3.4 Summary report on research with policymakers and CSOs. PERCEPTIONS H2020 Project No. 833870.

Bermejo, R., Carrasco, S., (2021). Deliverable 3.5. Multi-perspective Research Report. PERCEPTIONS H2020 Project No. 833870.

Ben Brahim, N., Hendow, M., (2022). Deliverable 3.6. Summary report on research with policymakers and CSOs. PERCEPTIONS H2020 Project No. 833870.

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<sup>i</sup> This policy brief is based on interviews and focus group discussions conducted with stakeholders in Italy, Morocco, the UK, and at the EU level. A total of 28 participants took part in this study, including 10 authority representatives (at the national, local or regional levels and including law enforcement actors), 4 civil society representatives, 6 international organisation representatives and 8 experts.