Power to UAMs:
Ensuring Equal Access, Participation, and Voice
at the Local Level

EU synthesis report

AUTHORS: ANIKÓ BERNÁT AND ORSOLYA SZABÓ

Organisation: TÁRKI Social Research Institute

BASED ON THE LOCAL REPORTS PREPARED BY THE PROJECT PARTNERS:
- ATHENS AND PIRAEUS IN GREECE: GREEK COUNCIL OF REFUGEES
- LIEGE, GHENT AND BRUSSELS IN BELGIUM: NETWORK OF AFGHAN DIASPORA ORGANISATIONS IN EUROPE (NADOE) AND CARITAS INTERNATIONAL BELGIUM
- CALAIS IN FRANCE: ECPAT FRANCE

THE LOCAL REPORTS ARE AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH AND LOCAL LANGUAGES ON THE PROJECT WEBSITE: HTTPS://BRIDGE-EU.ORG/POWER2UAMS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the financial support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights, Values (CERV) program, the project *'Power to UAMs: Ensuring Equal Access, Participation, and Voice at the Local Level'* was launched in 2025.

Building on existing literature, the Power2UAMs project conducted quantitative (questionnaire survey) and qualitative (interview) research across six European cities, namely Athens and Piraeus (in Greece), Calais (in France) and Brussels, Ghent, and Liège (in Belgium). The research focused on identifying unaccompanied children's access to public service at the local level. Six local reports were produced by partners who conducted research on the field.

This report presents a synthesis of the main findings of the six local reports.

Unaccompanied children face systemic barriers in accessing local public services
Across all six cities, the research reveals that unaccompanied children do not enjoy equal access to local, mainstream public services. While international and European law require the application of the best interests of the child and unconditional access to services, in practice support for unaccompanied children is largely organised through migration and asylum systems. This approach significantly limits access to mainstream services and undermines long-term social inclusion.

Lack of coordination weakens respect for child rights
The research highlights a lack of coordination across national, regional and local levels of governance. Responsibilities for unaccompanied children are fragmented between migration authorities, child protection systems and local service providers, resulting in gaps in protection and unclear accountability. Local public authorities and service providers do not consistently provide the necessary support or ensure equal access for unaccompanied children. Services provided by non-governmental organisations frequently substitute for, rather than complement, public provision.

Structural gaps persist in long-term support and transition to adulthood
Unaccompanied children face limited access to local public services both before and after turning 18, with non-governmental organisations in some cases replacing public provision without ensuring sustainable support. Aftercare and transition support are frequently lacking, contributing to housing insecurity and socio-economic marginalisation. In addition, limited access to foster care results in prolonged stays in reception or segregated group settings and increases the risk of homelessness, while access to mental health and psychosocial support remains very limited.

Unequal access to inclusive education undermines integration
Access to good quality, inclusive education remains a major barrier for unaccompanied children. The research identifies widespread reliance on segregated reception or language classes, which hinder access to mainstream education. Unaccompanied children also face discriminatory treatment, including racism and bullying, and are frequently directed towards low-skilled vocational pathways, limiting access to higher education.

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Access to justice and participation rights remain limited
Unaccompanied children experience discrimination and abuse in accessing services and in everyday life, yet their access to justice and legal protection is limited. Compared to other children deprived of parental care, unaccompanied children do not enjoy equal access to remedies, legal assistance or participation mechanisms. Their needs are insufficiently assessed, and their voices are rarely meaningfully included in service provision and policymaking.

Stronger, child-rights-based policy responses are urgently needed
The findings underline the need for structural reforms to ensure that unaccompanied children are treated first and foremost as children, rather than through migration policies. In particular, the following recommendations are presented:

- *Ensure equal access to mainstream local public services*: Unaccompanied children should have unconditional and equal access to local, mainstream public services, regardless of migration status. Migration-related services should not replace child protection, health, education and social services. Administrative procedures must be simplified and made child-friendly and multilingual, with systematic linguistic support and targeted training for public service staff on child rights, non-discrimination and trauma-informed approaches.
- *Strengthen governance and local coordination*: Clearer coordination is needed between national, regional and local authorities to prevent fragmentation and gaps in protection. Local coordination mechanisms should connect education, health, housing and social services, while cooperation with non-governmental organisations should complement, not substitute, public service provision. Policies affecting unaccompanied children should be integrated into broader child and youth policies.
- *Guarantee equal access to foster care*: Unaccompanied children should have equal access to foster care and other family-based care options on the same basis as other children deprived of parental care. Individualised support should be based on assessed needs, and foster carers should receive appropriate training to respond to the specific experiences of unaccompanied children.
- *Ensure inclusive education and pathways to employment*: Unaccompanied children should have access to mainstream, inclusive and non-segregated education at all levels. Segregated classes should be eliminated, with language and learning support provided within mainstream settings. Education and training pathways should be flexible and linked to sustainable employment opportunities.
- *Strengthen support during the transition to adulthood*: Continued support and follow-up by the guardian beyond the age of 18 should be ensured, in order to facilitate accessing education, training, psychological care and housing to prevent homelessness or sub-standard housing and support an independent adult life of former UAMs.

1.INTRODUCTION

The European Union has developed a legal and policy framework aimed at ensuring the promotion and protection of the rights of all children, regardless of their migration background or residence status. The obligation to respect and protect children's rights applies to public authorities at all levels, including national, regional and local authorities.

Despite legal obligations, unaccompanied children – whether they have made an application for international protection (asylum application) or are in transit to another country - remain among the most vulnerable children in Europe. They face persistent barriers in having equal access to public services, including child protection, housing, education, healthcare and protection from violence and abuse.

Many studies have explored the challenges unaccompanied children face, however these tend to focus on the respect for child rights within migration and asylum systems, and focus less on unaccompanied children's access to mainstream services at the local level.
Against this background, this report aims to identify the needs of unaccompanied children and examine their access to services at the local level. The report focuses on the situations faced by unaccompanied children in the following European cities: Calais (France); Athens and Piraeus (Greece); and Liège, Ghent and Brussels (Belgium). These cities offer different perspectives, reflecting, for example, different situations in which unaccompanied children find themselves (for example, children within the asylum system or in 'transit').

Key terminology: unaccompanied child

An unaccompanied child is a person under the age of 18 who arrives on the territory of an EU Member State without an adult responsible for them under law or practice, and who is not effectively taken into the care of such a person. This definition also includes children who become unaccompanied after entering the territory of a Member State. [1]

While EU law uses the term "unaccompanied minor", this report uses "unaccompanied child" to emphasise that they are children first and foremost.

The report further makes a distinction between:
• Unaccompanied children in the asylum system – these are children who have filed for asylum in a Member State and are currently under the care of the Member State concerned.
• Unaccompanied children in transit – these are children who may have been in the asylum system of a Member State, but have left to another Member State and currently live undocumented. They may also sometimes be considered missing.

[1]Article 2(5) Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection

2. EU LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS ENSURING EQUAL RIGHTS OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Unaccompanied children are affected by several EU legal and policy frameworks. This chapter outlines the key principles stemming from the EU and international legal instruments and policy frameworks (see Annex 1 for a detailed overview).

2.1 CHILDREN FIRST: THE PRIMACY OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

As children, unaccompanied children in the context of migration are first and foremost entitled to the full protection of children's rights.

This is clearly set out in the Charter of Fundamental rights of the European Union (Charter).[2] As EU primary law, the Charter prevails over EU secondary legislation, including migration and asylum instruments. Migration and asylum rules must therefore be interpreted and applied in a manner that gives full effect to children's rights.

The obligations in the Charter are reinforced by binding international instruments, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), to which all Member States have ratified, and which equally applies to all children within a State's jurisdiction, including unaccompanied children in migration contexts.[3]

Children must be treated without discrimination, irrespective of migration background, race or ethnic origin, disability, gender, or residence status. This is reinforced also by needs specific legislation, among others such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by the EU and all EU member states), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and secondary legislation like the Racial Equality Directive.[4]

Table 1. Key provisions from the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

Article 21 – Non-discrimination
1. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.
2. Within the scope of application of the Treaties and without prejudice to any of their specific provisions, any discrimination on grounds of nationality shall be prohibited.

Article 24 – The rights of the child
1. Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. They may express their views freely. Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.
2. In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.
3. Every child shall have the right to maintain on a regular basis a personal relationship and direct contact with both his or her parents, unless that is contrary to his or her interests.

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[2] Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012/C 326/02)
[3] United Nationals Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted on 20 November 1989 by General Assembly resolution 44/25
[4] Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin

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These legislative obligations are complemented by policy frameworks, notably the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child[5] which aims to ensure the protection of rights of all children, and secure access to basic services for vulnerable children. A key initiative of the strategy is the European Child Guarantee[6]: an EU-wide initiative aimed at preventing and combating child poverty or social exclusion by guaranteeing effective access of children in need in the EU to a set of key services (e.g. early childhood education and care, inclusive education and school-based activities, healthcare, housing), of which children with a migrant background are mentioned as part of the target groups.[7]

2.2 MIGRATION AND ASYLUM STATUS AS A SECONDARY CONSIDERATION

Against this legal background, EU migration and asylum legislation provides sector-specific rules governing the reception, care and procedural treatment of unaccompanied children.
Until December 2025, the applicable legal frameworks were formed by the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), a set of laws that sought to harmonise common minimum standards for asylum across the EU. Even though the implementation procedure will only begin in June 2026, the Pact on Migration and Asylum - a set of new rules managing migration and establishing a common asylum system - came into force in January 2026.[8] These legislative texts addressed, amongst others, asylum procedures and reception conditions.[9]

Despite recommendations and warnings from civil society organisations on the harmful impact of the reforms on fundamental rights, the final text of the Pact normalises the arbitrary use of immigration detention, including for children and families, increase racial profiling, use "crisis" procedures to enable pushbacks, and return individuals to so called "safe third countries" where they are at risk of violence, torture, and arbitrary imprisonment.[10] Moreover, unaccompanied children risk being put in the "asylum border procedure", which is a type of accelerated asylum procedure.[11]

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[5] Commission Communication, EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, COM/2021/142 final
[6] Council Recommendations (EU) 2021-1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, L 223/14
[7] An analysis of the biennial report on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee shows that some Member States are putting in place targeted services for unaccompanied minors, including Cyprus, Greece and Slovenia. For more information see: Eurochild, 2025, Promising Practices from the European Child Guarantee
[8] European Commission, 29 May 2024, Understanding the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum
[9] Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast); Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/201
[10] For a detailed analysis, see Joint statement signed by over 30 organizations, 2024, Safeguarding the Rights of Unaccompanied Children at EU Borders under the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum Joint NGO analysis and recommendations; PICUM, 2024, Children's rights in the 2024 Migration and Asylum Pact: Analysis of the Screening Regulation, the Asylum Procedures Regulation, the Return Border Procedure Regulation and Eurodac
[11] International Commission of Jurists, Save the Children and Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) Legal considerations around the application of the asylum border procedure to unaccompanied children Interpretation of Article 53(1) of the Asylum Procedures Regulation

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In addition, for unaccompanied children falling outside of the asylum system, it's important to note also legislation aimed at controlling borders (such as the Schengen Border Code[12] and enforcing deportation (such as the Return Directive[13] currently under revision[14]).

While these instruments contain child-specific safeguards, they should not replace or limit the application of children's rights. Rather, they must be applied in a manner that is fully consistent with children's rights and with the obligation to prioritise the best interests of the child in all decisions and procedures affecting unaccompanied children.

In practice, however, a child's residence status takes precedence over their status as a child, which affects their equal treatment.

[12] Regulation (EU) 2016/399 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on a Union Code on the rules governing the movement of persons across borders (Schengen Borders Code) (codification)
[13] Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals
[14] In March 2025 the European Commission made a proposal for a Return Regulation. It has been heavily criticized by civil society organisations, including with how the proposal would impact child rights. Over 250 organisations called for its rejection.

3.LITERATURE REVIEW ON UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN THE EU

This chapter summarises key findings from existing literature on the situation of unaccompanied children in the EU. It provides an overview of key figures and trends, outlines the main challenges faced by unaccompanied children in different situations, and highlights the role of local authorities and child participation in ensuring access to protection and services.

3.1 KEY FIGURES AND TRENDS

Over the past decade, unaccompanied children have consistently represented a significant share of children applying for asylum in the EU, accounting on average for around 15% of first-time child asylum applicants.[15] Approximately 34,000 unaccompanied children applied for international protection in EU countries in 2024.[16] While this marked a decrease compared to the peak in 2023, numbers remained well above pre-COVID-19 levels.[17] Although most applicants were boys, the proportion of girls has gradually increased.

In 2024, around 6,100 asylum applications lodged by unaccompanied children were withdrawn, with the vast majority concerning boys aged 14–17.[18] Withdrawals indicate that some unaccompanied children disengage from the system and decide to leave care. Others may be pushed to leave care by those who want to profit from their vulnerabilities. According to the journalists' collective Lost in Europe, at least 51,433 unaccompanied minors have disappeared from asylum centers in Europe between 2021 and 2023.[19]

3.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Unaccompanied children's access to protection and services is influenced by their residence status, for example whether they have applied for asylum or are living in transit or in an undocumented situation. At the same time, children's situations are not static: many move between countries or residence statuses for reasons such as family reunification, inadequate reception conditions or prolonged administrative procedures. Existing literature therefore points to a set of overlapping challenges faced by unaccompanied children across different contexts. Key challenges identified in the literature include among others:

- *Lack of recognition as children*, notably through discrimination or age assessment procedures that fail to comply with applicable legal standards, leading to the lack of respect for their rights.[20]

[15] Eurostat, children in migration – asylum applicants, data extracted 10 April 2025
[16] European Union Agency for Asylum, Data Analysis of Unaccompanied Minors in 2024, Fact sheet, EUAA/2025/36 August 2025
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Lost in Europe, 30 April 2024, More than 50,000 unaccompanied children disappeared in Europe
[20] European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), December 2022, Age Assessment in Europe; Quan, G. M., & Skelton, A.,2025, Age determination of unaccompanied migrant children: An appraisal of the jurisprudence of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Nordic Journal of Human Rights, 43(1), 59–81. Greek Council for Refugees and Save the Children, 2023, "Without papers, there is no life" Legal barriers in access to protection for unaccompanied children in Greece; Committee on the Rights of the Child Report on the inquiry concerning France conducted under article 13 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure*, CRC/C/FRA/IR/1

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- *Segregation from mainstream child protection systems*, with unaccompanied children frequently placed in parallel, migration-specific reception and care arrangements rather than being integrated into mainstream child protection services.[21] This includes a continued reliance on institutional care for unaccompanied children, despite the need to prioritise family-based and community-based alternatives.[22]
- *Limited access to information*, with children often lacking clear, accessible and child-friendly information about their rights, procedures and available support, which undermines their ability to make informed decisions and access services.[23]
- *Barriers in accessing asylum*, including slow and complex procedures that are poorly adapted to children's needs,[24] as well as unequal protection frameworks within the EU that can result in differentiated treatment of unaccompanied children depending on nationality or country of origin.[25]
- *Limited access to education* and enrolment in segregated education.[26]
- *Insufficient guardianship and legal support*, including delayed appointments with guardians, high caseloads and limited contact with guardians or legal representatives, affecting children's protection and participation in decisions.[27]
- *Housing insecurity*, including repeated relocations between emergency shelters, reception centres or other accommodation, inappropriate or unstable housing conditions and, in some cases, homelessness, particularly for children in transit, or after turning 18.[28]

[21] Derluyn, Ilse, 2018, A Critical Analysis of the Creation of Separated Care Structures for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Chidlren and youth services review, vol. 92, pp. 22–29; UNICEF, 2024, Inclusion of Children in the Context of Migration into National Child Protection Systems ; Fundamental Rights Agency, 2024, Mapping child protection systems in the EU

[22] Lumos, 2020, Rethinking Care: Improving support for unaccompanied migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee children in the European Union

[23] European Union Agency for Asylum, Asylum Report 2023; Caritas International Belgium, 2023, Unaccompanied minors 'in transit' in Belgium: the case for pre-reception and specific support

[24] European Union Agency for Asylum, Asylum Report 2024

[25] For example, the Greek Council for Refugees, Oxfam and Save the Children have documented a "two-tier refugee response" in Greece, with different standards of protection applied to displaced people from Ukraine compared to other refugees, including unaccompanied children.

[26] OECD findings on inclusive education, echoed by other research (e.g., the findings of the SIRIUS network) suggest that rapid mainstream placement combined with ongoing language support is more effective than prolonged reception education. However, research from Greece (see Stergiou, L. and Simopoulos, G., 2024; Stathopoulou, T. et al., 2025) and Belgium (see Kemper, R. et al., 2022; Seynhaeve, S. et al., 2024) shows that unaccompanied children are often placed in separate reception classes/programmes, thereby reinforcing segregation from mainstream education and contributing to poorer educational outcomes.

[27] Fundamental Rights Agency, 2022, Guardianship systems for unaccompanied children in the European Union: developments since 2014; Missing Children Europe, 2021, Key challenges faced by children in migration: outcomes of the Lost in Migration Conference Local Hubs; Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2023, "Happiness, Love and Understanding" The protection of unaccompanied minors in the 27 EU member states; Caritas International Belgium, 2023, Unaccompanied minors 'in transit' in Belgium: the case for pre-reception and specific support

[28] Human rights watch, 2024, France: Migrant Children Sleep in the Street in Marseille ; Committee on the Rights of the Child Report on the inquiry concerning France conducted under article 13 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure*, CRC/C/FRA/IR/1; Caritas International Belgium, 2023, Unaccompanied minors 'in transit' in Belgium: the case for pre-reception and specific support

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- *Limited access to healthcare, including barriers to primary care and specialised services, as well as insufficient access to mental health and psychosocial support, despite high levels of medical needs.*[29]
- *Lack of support in the transition to adulthood, due to changes in residence status.*[30]
- *Exposure to violence, exploitation and abuse*, including risks linked to trafficking, criminal networks and reliance on informal or unsafe support networks, particularly for children in transit or living in precarious situations. This may also lead to children going missing.[31]
- *The continued use of immigration detention*, despite extensive evidence of its inherently harmful impact and its severe short- and long-term consequences for children's physical and mental health and development, and its incompatibility with children's rights standards.[32]

3.3 ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN RESPECTING RIGHTS AND PROVIDING SERVICES

Ensuring respect for the rights of unaccompanied children and their access to services is a shared responsibility between national, regional and local authorities, deriving from international, European and national legal frameworks. In most EU Member States, child protection systems are at least partly decentralised, with local authorities playing a central role in implementing protection measures and delivering or overseeing services.[33] Moreover, migration and social policies are typically developed at national level but implemented locally.[34]

Despite this central role, existing policy responses remain insufficient to address the needs of unaccompanied children. Fragmented responsibilities and weak coordination between governance levels pose significant challenges to accessing local public services.[35] These shortcomings expose unaccompanied children to heightened risks of violence, abuse, exploitation and disappearance, which are too often framed as voluntary acts without adequate assessment of underlying factors such as inadequate reception conditions, slow and complex procedures, fear of return, limited information on rights and services, negative experiences with authorities, and recruitment by criminal networks and traffickers.[36]

[33] Fundamental Rights Agency, 2024, Mapping child protection systems in the EU
[34] OECD, 2018, Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees
[35] Ibid.
[36] Missing Children Europe, 2021, Key challenges faced by children in migration: outcomes of the Lost in Migration Conference Local Hubs

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3.4 LIMITED SPACES FOR UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN TO RAISE THEIR VOICES

At EU and national levels, initiatives increasingly aim to promote child participation in policy-making, including in the context of migration. However, young people with lived experience of migration consistently report limited opportunities to express their views and to be meaningfully involved in decisions affecting their lives.[37] Existing participation mechanisms rarely reach unaccompanied children, particularly those in transit or living in precarious situations, contributing to their continued exclusion from decision-making processes.[38]

[37] Ibid.
[38] European Commission, 2021, Report on child participation in EU political and democratic life

4.METHODOLOGY

The synthesis report is based on the information provided by the local research reports, the findings of the literature review and follow the objectives and topics of local reports. The primary goal of the synthesis report is to provide an evidence-based, detailed but focused and conscience summary of the needs of UAMs, and the potential pitfalls of social support and services at local level. The methodology includes comprehensive desk research, interviews with UAMs and local stakeholders responsible for service provision, policymaking, etc. A mixed (quantitative and qualitative) research methodology was applied. The report also includes a description of identified gaps and concludes with policy recommendations that request modification of current policies.

All stages of the research posed some foreseen as well as unexpected challenges to the research teams. The key methodological components and common challenges are summarized below.

4.1 DESK RESEARCH AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Task: Desk research included literature review, collection and secondary analysis of available data with a strong emphasis on local level information on UAMs and the social services they might or might not receive at local level. This task included the review of official statistical data (i.e. Statbel, Belgian Immigration Office, Fedasil, Greek Ministry of Migration & Asylum, OECD, etc.), institutional reports (such as the Asylum Information Database from the European Council for Refugees and Exiles, or reports from the European Migration Network), academic literature, policy literature and legal documents as well as interviews with relevant institutions and stakeholders to better understand service provision, gaps and challenges at local level.

Challenges: Local-level data on UAMs was often limited, with most statistics only available at the national level in all localities.

4.2 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH UAMS

Task: Face-to-face, child-friendly interviews were conducted to complete the quantitative data collection and qualitative interviews with interpretation where needed. Consent was a strict requirement, usually facilitated by legal guardians. "No harm policy," non-re-traumatization, anonymity, and confidentiality was the main ethical driver throughout these phases.

Challenges: Common challenges are centred around logistical difficulties of recruitment and that some of the respondents refused voice recording for better documentation, despite that anonymity and confidentiality safeguards were explained both verbally and written to all interviewees in advance. Other challenges occurred in a few locations, such as sensitivity or reluctance to answer abstract questions (Ghent, Liége), difficulties recruiting UAMs to be interviewed in cities where the partners had fewer direct contacts (i.e. Ghent) or UAMs' high mobility and intention to remain invisible (Calais).

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4.3 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Task: Stakeholder interviews were conducted with representatives from reception centres, foster care, NGOs, integration services, legal guardians, and public officials. Most of the partners used their own networks and stakeholder referrals that could be complemented with snowball sampling to boost sample and make it more heterogeneous. Some stakeholders in Athens and Piraeus preferred written, analytical interviews due to time constraints, while others used face-to-face or online interviews.

Challenges: The data collection phase of the research was mainly conducted during the summer, but it was difficult to reach stakeholders during the summer break due to their holidays, while at the end of the summer/beginning of autumn they were usually busy with the start of the new academic year.

Number of interviews by city

CITY	UAMs	STAKEHOLDERS	SUM
Calais	7	9	16
Athens	10	11	21
Piraeus	10	9	19
Ghent	6	11	17
Liège	10	10	20
Brussels	11	14	25
TOTAL	54	64	118

4.METHODOLOGY

4.4 LOCAL LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION OF A COMMON RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research scope and methodological framework were consistent across all six local reports. Nevertheless, city-specific contextual factors and variations in data availability slightly influenced the emphasis and outcomes of the research in each case. In each city, the research concentrated on institutional and service mapping and provided a comprehensive and systematic overview of existing services with a strong local focus, with particular attention to identifying structural gaps in the implementation of unaccompanied minors' (UAMs) rights at local level from a child rights perspective. This approach was supported by the availability of local, regional, and national datasets, providing a robust empirical foundation for the analysis. In Greece and Belgium many services vital for UAMs provision and integration are organized and administered at national level and thus local level application (Athens and Piraeus in Greece and Brussels, Ghent, and Liège in Belgium) could be assessed from a stronger national (or regional) aspect.

In all countries, the scope of the analysis was shaped by constraints in data availability at the local level, leading to a greater reliance on official national data sources, mainly regarding the data and context of UAMs. In contrast, the French case study in Calais adopted a markedly narrower and more context-specific focus, due to specific case of UAMs "in transit." The research targeted the highly mobile underage migrant population of Calais who take very dangerous risks to reach the United Kingdom, emphasizing the challenges faced by this "invisible" group that actively avoids formal registration. Consequently, data collection proved particularly challenging, as this population largely remains absent from official statistics, significantly limiting the availability of reliable quantitative data.

Overall, these variations illustrate how local contexts, policy environments, and data accessibility influenced the operationalization of a shared methodological framework, resulting in differentiated analytical emphases across the case studies.

5.DESK RESEARCH ON THE SERVICE PROVISION IN THE SELECTED CITIES

The desk research provides a comparative analysis of the situation for unaccompanied children across the six cities highlighting a fundamental distinction between cities that serve as transit/entry points (Athens, Piraeus and Calais) and those that function more as settlement/final destination points (Belgium). In all localities, most of the services for UAMs are organized on the national level, and there is limited room left for local municipalities to change UAMs' access to public services. There are rather different policy directions that determine how each city acts and provides additional opportunities – beyond the national ones – for UAMs.

5.1 ATHENS AND PIRAEUS (GREECE)

The situation in the Athens/Attica region, including Piraeus, is defined by a national system that is often overwhelmed and characterized by systemic disruptions.
Regarding general responsibilities and housing, the General Secretariat for Vulnerable Persons and Institutional Protection (GSVP) under the Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum is the competent authority regarding UAMs in Greece. Its role is to support UAMs in accommodation and integration challenges and family reunification procedures. The National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM), run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), provides urgent, emergency accommodation, with three out of four facilities located in the broader Attica region (one in Piraeus). Besides the emergency shelters, there are long-term accommodation services primarily run by NGOs and "Supported Independent Living" arrangements for UAMs.[39] Despite the relatively broad variety of accommodation possibilities for UAMs, as of January 2025, there was a shortage of 478 proper accommodation places for unaccompanied children nationally.

A significant number of UAMs reported traumatizing experiences and inadequate living conditions in initial reception centres or "safe zones". The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has repeatedly convicted Greece for violations, including unlawful deprivation of liberty under "protective custody" and inhuman and degrading treatment (violation of Article 3 ECHR) due to inadequate living conditions in detention and reception centres.

The local authorities, the Immigrant Integration Centre of Athens Municipality and the Immigrant Integration Centre of Piraeus Municipality both have a limited role, primarily facilitating referrals and providing access to municipal spaces, a policy choice that may limit active integration. Municipalities decreased their roles regarding the protection and integration services for UAMs, compared to national actors.

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[39] 'Supported Independent Living' is an alternative housing arrangement for unaccompanied children aged 16 to 18, providing access to housing and a range of services (e.g., education and healthcare). It aims to facilitate the transition to adulthood and integration into Greek society and is recognised as a good practice by civil society.

5.DESK RESEARCH ON THE SERVICE PROVISION IN THE SELECTED CITIES

Age assessment is a crucial procedural issue which has been reformed by a recent decision by the Ministry of Migration and Ministry of Health of Greece. Accordingly, a three-step examination should be conducted within the same day on the UAM: a medical examination of physical development, a psychosocial assessment by a qualified specialist, and a wrist/hand X-ray for bone age estimation. This new decision was highly criticized by organizations, raising ethical, child-rights and logistical concerns.

UAMs' education is also a fundamental area of integration in which the current policy framework is underperforming. Under Greek legislation, unaccompanied children are required to be enrolled in education. Although "Reception Classes" should be provided for the better integration chances of these children, many schools often lack appropriate, functioning organizational structures and therefore UAMs are left without proper integration measures into the school system. Moreover, there are no flexible measures taken for UAMs' educational needs, i.e. vocational training or evening classes.

5.2 CALAIS (FRANCE)

Calais is an extreme example of a transit area where children are on the very margin of the official French child protection system, living in a precarious and volatile environment. The number of UAMs in Calais does not appear in official statistical data; only NGOs have an estimate, which is based on the number of UAMs they meet during their fieldwork.

France Terre d'Asile (FTDA) is the officially mandated organization in the Pas-de-Calais region, responsible for emergency sheltering and age assessment procedures. It operates two shelters nearby Calais, and its outreach team works on identifying UAMs in Calais on a daily basis. Besides FTDA, two NGOs play a crucial role in assisting and providing aid to UAMs in Calais: Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and ECPAT France.

UAMs in Calais suffer from a critical lack of basic services, including shelter, food, water, medical care, and education. France's failure to protect children in these camps has been cited by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

UAMs' precarious status in Calais is strongly linked to the fact they are in transit toward the UK and are difficult to reach and count due to their mobility. They live in unsafe, makeshift camps (slums/squats) and receive little dedicated support from state systems. Without legal routes to the UK, they mostly chose highly dangerous crossings such as hiding in trucks or boarding overcrowded dinghies. While some specific child protection measures are operating in Calais (unlike other localities on the border), the lack of sufficient adaptation to the specific needs of UAMs in transit remains a crucial issue, as it is resulting in severely unmet needs.

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Moreover, UAMs in Calais are exposed to violence, exploitation by smugglers, sexual exploitation, and a consistent "zero point of settlement" policy enforced by police evictions.[40]

5.3 BRUSSELS, GHENT, AND LIÈGE (BELGIUM)

Belgium is mainly viewed as a country of settlement where the focus shifts to integration, but the system is complex and fragmented across different levels of government. Reception centers, guardianship and age assessment procedures are coordinated on the federal level. The regional or municipal level mostly comes into play in terms of education, and also once the UAM receives a residence permit and can access social services and housing.

Fedasil (the federal reception agency), the Guardianship Service and the Immigration Office are the key actors on the federal level in Belgium. All UAMs are assigned a guardian upon arrival, who is responsible for assisting the UAM in accessing all kinds of social support they are entitled to. Once they are recognized as refugees, they have the right to receive social welfare. A three-level reception system has been set up in Belgium for UAMs: 1) First phase 'Orientation and Observation Centers' are meant to determine the individual needs of UAMs as a first step to orientate the UAM to a suitable place in second phase reception, 2) second-phase reception centres host UAMs until they receive the decision regarding their residence status, 3) third phase 'individual accommodations' are set up for those who receive a positive decision, where the child prepares for independent living until reaching the age of 18. However, shortages of private housing and limited capacity in the 3rd phase of the reception system often hinder the realization of such settings and therefore UAMs must either stay in second-phase reception centres or accept moving to another city which uproots them from their support system.

Regarding education, UAMs are offered a (usually) 1-year reception/integration class called DASPA/OKAN (depending on the region and language) which offers French or Dutch language and other classes, with the aim to assist newcomers in integration into secondary education. Certain critiques highlight the segregating element of such a system, such as the classrooms or buildings where these classes take place are often too far from the local students, making interactions between UAMs and local children almost impossible. For children in primary education, this system does not exist. They attend the same classes as their Belgian peers from the beginning.

[40] The prefecture's "zero point of settlement" strategy has been in place since 2021. It aims to avoid the settlement of a massive and 'organised' camp as it was the case in 2015-2016 in Calais, thus, informal camps are evicted every 48 hours. These evictions take place on the legal basis of flagrante delicto: the police can intervene when ordered by the public prosecutor to put an end to recurrent occupations of land, following a complaint by the owner, as long as the camp has not been in existence for more than 48 hours. For the sole month o f July 2025, 44 evictions took place in the Calais locality for a total of 300 persons evicted. Human Rights Observers, "Monthly report of State violence observations documented by Human Rights Observers in the Calais area, Pas-de-Calais - July 2025" https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/2025-07_Monthly_Report_Calaisis_EN-1.pdf

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UAMs in Belgium are offered basic health insurance and emergency care which is organized on a federal level. However, studies have shown that UAMs face significant psychological stress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and depression, but the availability and accessibility of psychological and psychiatric services for UAMs remain insufficient.
Age assessment procedures are done by an X-ray of the collarbone, wrist, and teeth. Although the reliability of this procedure has been widely criticized, it is commonly used across the country.

A major challenge is the fragmented governance between federal, regional, and local agencies. A common issue is the shortage of housing in the third phase and upon an UAM turns 18. Despite the centralized policy framework at national level, the three cities covered by the project demonstrate some differences in local level implementation of the reception and integration of UAMs:

- **Liège (Wallonia)**: Demonstrates an attitude of solidarity, declaring itself a "Ville Hospitalière", a "hospitable, responsible, welcoming, and open city" in Wallonia. The city is part of the Urbact WELDI network (Building Welcoming Communities for Migrants), funded by the European Union whereby members aim to develop policies that assist UAMs in accessing their rights. Importantly, UAMs in the Walloon region are entitled to family allowance (child support) even without residence status, which aids financial stability.

- **Ghent (Flanders)**: Ghent has a significant migrant population (recent data shows that around 30% of the population is born outside of Belgium) and it coupled with a strong commitment to welcome and support refugees wanting to settle. UAMs in Flanders are entitled to receive "Groeipakket", a package of social benefits tailored to each child and family, similar to the family allowance in the Walloon region. As in other parts of the country, there is a severe housing crisis which limits the possibilities of UAMs to begin their individual lives after receiving residence status. The city aims to address the housing crisis by several initiatives, such as increasing the number of social housings.

- **Brussels**: The role of the local authority is also limited, as most of the policies and actions regarding UAMs are organized on the federal level. There are two Brussels-based emergency reception centres that hold an unofficial agreement with the authorities that they do not report minors-in-transit to the authorities, for up to three months – however, the existence of these two shelters is under pressure. Unlike in Wallonia and Flanders, UAMs in Brussels only receive child support after gaining residence status.

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5.4 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS OF THE DESK RESEARCH

The six cities of three EU countries represent a spectrum of situations for UAMs, ranging from immediate danger and systemic negligence to formalized care and integration efforts.

Feature	Athens / Piraeus (Greece)	Calais (France)	Liège, Ghent, & Brussels (Belgium)
Primary Status & Goal	Transit/Entry: Minors seeking onward migration to Western Europe.	Transit/Irregular: Minors attempting to reach the UK as soon as they can.	Settlement/Destination: Minors aiming to integrate/settle in Belgium. [41]
Nature of Challenge	Systemic & Humanitarian Crisis: Lack of shelter capacity, unlawful deprivation of liberty. Moreover, the guardianship system is ineffective, and shortages of housing solutions affects UAMs over 18.	Violence & Exclusion: Physical violence, police evictions, lack of basic needs (shelter, food, etc.)	Structural & Governance: Fragmentation of services (federal vs. regional) and housing shortages, difficult transition towards adulthood.
Official protection	Violation of ECtHR: Protection is failed, violation of human rights (Articles 3 & 5).	Extremely limited: the French child protection system lacks sufficient adaptation to UAMs in transit's needs, more pro-active system would be needed from the state-level.	Mandatory Guardianship: Strong legal framework ensures legal and social representation from arrival.
Local authority role	Minimal: Primarily logistical (referrals, municipal access). Athens relies heavily on NGOs for non-formal education.	Limited: Official child protection is present on the ground daily to drive UAMs to the shelter, but UAMs who refuse it are exposed to evictions every 48h by the police.	Limited both at regional and local levels: Wallonia and Flanders regions provide early social security (family allowance) (Liege and Ghent). Brussels has a more limited, fragmented local role.
Access to social rights	Bottlenecked: Legal rights exist but are hindered by delays and capacity shortages (e.g., shelter waiting times).	Limited: Due to their transit situation and a lack of adaptation, UAMs have limited access to shelter, food. No access to education.	Formalized: Access to social rights is facilitated by a legal guardian. Access to education (DASPA/OKAN) and healthcare is organized (but limited), but early access to social benefits varies by region.

[41] Even though there are some UAMs in transit in Belgium (mainly in Brussels), Belgian partners were unable to include them in the interviews.

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In summary, the three countries presented have different roles in UAMs' lives in their transitions to their new home-countries. Athens and Piraeus in Greece usually serve as entry or transit points for UAMs. Although there are several integration measures at the national level, there are systematic violations of child rights of UAMs which were presented by the European Court of Human Rights in several cases. Calais in France is similarly a transit point where UAMs go mostly only to cross to the UK. They either hide or mingle with adult asylum-seekers and therefore they are difficult to reach by official authorities. NGOs work on the field in order to provide short-term support such as food, mobile charging opportunities, or showers to all exiled in transit, including UAMs. These children often lack basic needs and the UN In summary, the three countries presented have different roles in UAMs' lives in their transitions to their new home-countries. Athens and Piraeus in Greece usually serve as entry or transit points for UAMs. Although there are several integration measures at the national level, there are systematic violations of child rights of UAMs which were presented by the European Court of Human Rights in several cases. Calais in France is similarly a transit point where UAMs go mostly only to cross to the UK. They either hide or mingle with adult asylum-seekers and therefore they are difficult to reach by official authorities. NGOs work on the field in order to provide short-term support such as food, mobile charging opportunities, or showers to all exiled in transit, including UAMs. These children often lack basic needs and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child condemned France due to its systematic failure to protect unaccompanied minors in Calais. Belgium, compared to Calais and the Greek localities, is a goal destination for many UAMs. Ghent and Liège declared themselves as open, inclusive cities, and they try to assist UAMs to access basic rights. Wallonia and Flanders regions provide child allowance to UAMs even before a positive asylum decision. However, due to shortages in housing, lack of mental health support and persistent barriers to inclusion in mainstream secondary and tertiary education, long-term integration of UAMs is challenging in Belgium. NGOs fill important service gaps at the local level, providing legal, psychosocial and integration support.

6. EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD: FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH UAMS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The focus of the analysis is on local-level services, unmet needs, and enforcement of rights of UAMs as children across six European urban contexts through the voice and lived experiences of UAMs and stakeholders in charge of supporting UAMs. In this section, the main findings from quantitative and qualitative interviews in the six cities are presented through the lens of child rights. The examination of the structural similarities and localized differences in these cities identifies the "structural ruptures" in several aspects, that hinder minors' access to mainstream local services and from receiving the same services and support that is available to local vulnerable children.

The research among minors across all six locations reveals a fundamental paradox: while European reception systems usually provide essential (reception) services, they often fail to provide access to mainstream, local services. This would be crucial for the social and economic inclusion of UAMs. Furthermore, services do not respond to the individual needs of UAMs, including the developmental needs. Service provision and support stop when a minor reaches adulthood, aftercare services are not ensured. UAMs face systematic rights violations, ranging from age assessments and police intimidation to the lack of access to services. It reinforces insecurity that hinders the social inclusion of UAMs.

The experiences of UAMs and stakeholders suggest that service delivery framework for UAMs adopts an approach that is more akin to refugee care than childcare, which leads to inadequate and often segregated housing and education services at the local level. This institutional framework often differs from, or operates separately from, general childcare services provided to local minors.

6.1 THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH UAMS

6.1.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWS WITH UAMS

The data is derived from qualitative and quantitative interviews with UAMs (N=54 in total, primarily males (N=49) aged 13–22, with only 5 females in various cities) from diverse geopolitical contexts, including Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, Mali, Eritrea, Sudan, Guinea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, and Ukraine. Unaccompanied children are defined as individuals under the age of 18. Although some interviewees are slightly older, they share recent experiences comparable to those of UAMs under 18; therefore, their accounts remain equally valid. While many UAMs sought specific destinations like the UK (via Calais) or Belgium due to family ties or integration, others arrived in Greece simply because it was the first accessible point of entry into the EU. Across all cities, UAMs exhibited high educational aspirations and resilience despite facing significant psychosocial stressors related to displacement and family separation.

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6.1.2 HOUSING AND THE PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS

From a child rights perspective, the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 27 CRC) is systematically compromised by fragmented reception and transition frameworks in all the six cities covered by the research. The analysis reveals that the state's obligation to provide "special protection and assistance" (Article 20 CRC) is often ignored in favour of reactive, temporary measures. This covers some distinctive trends that can be observed to varying degrees in the cities participating in the project.

The most critical unmet need is the lack of a sustainable transition framework for those reaching the age of majority. It is especially relevant in Piraeus and Athens, where unaccompanied children face abrupt exclusion from housing upon turning 18. This structural failure is captured by one minor's testimony: *"Since I turned 18, they forced me to leave the shelter; I suddenly had to stay outside."*

The specific situation of UAMs in Calais leads to active deprivation and state failure as the situation is one of state-sanctioned precarity. UAMs who do not wish to join the shelter, or are refused entry due to lack of space, survive in informal camps or open-air squats subject to evictions every 48 hours. These living conditions represent direct violation of child rights emphasizing their vulnerability; one UAM noted: *"If I had had a tent and a sleeping bag when I arrived in Calais, I would have felt calmer."*

De facto homelessness at entry points is especially relevant in Calais, but some UAMs interviewed in Piraeus also recalled it in another Greek location: *"In Rhodes Island I was sleeping for four days in the streets."* Initial arrival may involve immediate homelessness due to administrative gaps.

Financial precarity and discrimination are often going hand in hand with housing issues. In Belgian cities (Liège, Brussels, Ghent), bureaucratic delays in financial support during the transition to independent living create *"acute hardship."* One minor expressed the stress of this administrative lag: *"It's the first time you've rented the apartment; they don't pay quickly... When you don't have the money, that's the problem."* Furthermore, UAMs face discrimination in the private housing market, where landlords frequently refuse to rent to migrants, pushing them toward precarious informal networks.

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6.1.3 HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

While physical healthcare is often rated as "adequate", the fulfilment of the right to the "highest attainable standard of health" (Article 24 CRC) is hindered by a failure to provide comprehensive mental health support and by significant structural barriers.

In the case of UAMs, it is highly likely that they are struggling with psychosocial health issues, yet specialized support is often insufficient or lacking follow-up in each of the six cities but in varying extent. Mental health care of UAMs is in an invisible crisis in each city involved in the research. Physical symptoms often mask deep psychological distress. In Brussels and Ghent, minors reported recurring problems mainly linked to psychological distress, such as panic attacks or suicidal thoughts. These are exacerbated by the stress of the asylum procedure and poor reception conditions. Financial barriers in accessing psychosocial health services represent a significant unmet need; one UAM reported being *"told to pay and could not afford it"* when seeking psychological help. This violates the principle of non-discrimination in accessing essential services.

Institutional neglect at entry points and border zones was also reported with regard to mental health issues of UAMs. An unaccompanied child previously in a Greek island reception center stated: *"They didn't care about your health no matter how sick you were."* This neglect suggests that, at borders, refugee status often strips the child of their inherent rights to care.

Short-term, emergency response as opposed to the long-term treatment is a major structural issue in this field. Psychosocial needs are largely unaddressed in some cities, specifically regarding the trauma of family separation. In Calais, UAMs employ a survival strategy of self-denial to avoid institutional attention: *"I did not feel hungry; it was sufficient."* This indicates a system where children feel they must minimize their basic needs to maintain their agency or journey.

6.1.4 BARRIERS IN ACCESSING EDUCATION

Equal access to education is a basic child right, enshrined by the UN CRC and the Charter. However, the interviews with minors confirm that UAMs face structural and personal barriers that prevent equal access and rights. In Liège, a minor had mixed experiences and highlighted the impact of teacher absenteeism: *"The school is very good, but you have to do many things yourself. Sometimes we spend more time playing around than we actually learn. (...) Most of the time the teachers don't come, and we spend most of the day, from 8 o'clock in until 2 in the afternoon doing sports and playing around and because of that there is no consistency. Even if we do learn something, the next day the teacher will not be there, so we cannot keep practicing the same thing. By the time they come back, it has been weeks. So, it is really hard to keep up".* In Ghent, UAMs expressed dissatisfaction with being tracked into vocational programs like mechanics when they desired regular mainstream education.

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In Athens and Piraeus, economic pressures often force UAMs to prioritize immediate, often exploitative work over schooling.

In Calais, education is not even on the table when it comes to services to UAMs due to their very short-term goal to stay there before leaving for the UK.

6.1.5 POLICE INTERACTIONS AND AGE ASSESSMENT

The research documents a spectrum of negative interactions with law enforcement that erode trust in protection systems. In Athens, unaccompanied children reported being *"stopped without cause"* and *"searched in public"* by local police, which they interpreted as acts of criminalization. In Calais, police interactions are primarily repressive: *"In Calais, it was hard with the police… when we try [to sneak in cars], they can drag us out violently"*. Severe physical abuse was reported at the borders of Kos and Rhodes (recalled by UAMs interviewed in Athens and Pireaus), where one child recounted: *"Abuse and violence by the police. They made us sit on our knees for 2 hours… they forced me to eat the coffee grounds"*.

Rights violations are further institutionalized through the age assessment procedure, often criticized because of its non-transparent and outdated methods which does not follow a holistic approach. In Liège, a minor noted: *"They give you the age the machine gives you and most of the time it is not correct. (…) The whole process is not really that transparent"*. In Brussels, one participant reported an entire group was arbitrarily given the same age: *"They just gave us all 22 (years)… how come all of us got the same, 21 and 6 months? All of us… I did not feel satisfied"*.

6.1.6. DISRUPTED ACCESS TO SUPPORT AND SERVICES AFTER TURNING 18

For most teenagers, turning 18 is a liberating moment that is worth celebrating. UAMs on the contrary, may feel that this moment is rather burdensome as it leads to overall insecurity and has an overarching effect on their legal status, survival and integration prospects. This structural rupture transforms protected children into marginalized adults without a transition framework, which is happening in all project cities, albeit at varying degrees. As one child in Piraeus explained, upon turning 18, *"the only assistance from the ministry was to send me back to a camp like the one we stayed at on the islands, and that too very far from Athens"*. This lack of continuity forces a reliance on informal networks to prevent homelessness, undermining the very goal of durable integration.

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6.2 THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH THE STAKEHOLDERS

Interviews with stakeholders responsible for local-level services provided to UAMs confirm the conclusions drawn from interviews with UAMs, as they also highlight the insufficient fit between the "safety first" institutional mandate of reception systems and the actual development needs of UAMs. While we see in cities like Brussels, Ghent, and Liège that the Belgian national system provides structured guardian-based support, UAMs are plagued by administrative delays and sometimes questionable outcomes/decisions regarding age assessments. In contrast, the Greek cities (Athens and Piraeus) face extreme centralization and a lack of municipal engagement, leading to a kind of institutionalism. Calais remains a site of humanitarian precarity where state actors prioritize border control over child protection. Stakeholder interviews also confirmed that across all cities, the transition to the age of 18 acts as a point of structural disruption, where support vanishes and former UAMs who have become young adults pro forma are at immediate risk of becoming homeless and exploited.

6.2.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED

The study engaged a multidisciplinary cohort of professionals including social workers, psychologists, legal advisors, educators, and municipal officers. In Athens and Piraeus participants primarily represented authorities and NGOs managing services and shelters and municipal social solidarity services. The samples in the Belgian cities (Brussels, Ghent, Liège) included state and regional actors, legal guardians, and specialized NGOs and experts of various relevant fields, many with extensive backgrounds in integration and guardianship. Stakeholders interviewed in Calais included both officially mandated child protection services and non-mandated humanitarian associations primarily staffed by volunteers.

6.2.2. FRAGMENTATION AND COORDINATION GAPS IN SERVICE PROVISIONS

Stakeholders across all six cities describe a heavily centralized, migration-approached service characterized by systemic fragmentation and a reliance on temporary project funding, however with different patterns in focus.

The Greek case, based on stakeholder interviews carried out with regard Athens and Piraeus prove that centralized refugee care is dominant where the municipality's role is indirect and very limited. Service providers are often NGOs specialized in the field with also limited and sometimes unclear room for maneuver given the centralized legal and procedural frameworks. One stakeholder noted that actions *"depend on which NGOs are active at a given time… It is not always clear who is responsible for what"*. Moreover, UAMs are perceived more as refugee minors than children per se who would be entitled to generic child protection services and thus services available to UAMs are often not integrated into the mainstream childcare and educational services.

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Belgium's approach is similar in terms of centralized refugee-focused service provision, but legal guardians are in the heart of the UAM service provision ecosystem, in which, especially according to accounts of stakeholders working in Ghent and Liège, services are highly dependent on the individual skills, experiences and initiative of the guardian in question. A professional in Ghent explained: *"You have to have the luck of having a guardian who knows the system… It's a lot to do with luck, where you are placed, who your guardian is… that makes you receive services".*

Calais provides an outlier case due to the very short stay of UAMs whose aim to leave for UK as soon as possible rather than staying in France. It triggers a highly permanent and survival-oriented approach for both children and service providers. It may also imply that NGOs and volunteers are sometimes not experienced with this very specific target group. Many associations meet these children only through daily outreach, but *"are not trained to work with UAMs, nor equipped to do so."*

6.2.3 UNMET NEEDS OF UAMS (HOUSING, EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE)

While immediate needs for food and emergency shelter are generally met, stakeholders identify critical shortcomings in providing long-term support in all the six cities despite the stark differences among these cities by legal and service provision frameworks. Calais again differs from the other localities, as long-term integration is not aimed for UAMs here, while it is often planned to or desired to various extents by UAMs who are living in Greece and Belgium. However, major housing, financial, educational and health related barriers, as the main obstacles often emerge that usually hinder integration of UAMs into their host cities. Unaccompanied children's short and long-term needs are often insufficiently addressed by state and local level services due to several structural reasons, ranging from insufficient service capacities, service fragmentation, and an overall lack of a fundamental approach to children's rights which fails to notice that UAMs are primarily vulnerable children and not just young refugees.

Housing capacities are often limited, offer low quality, lack of privacy and isolated from mainstream host society both in space and social terms in all cities investigated in this research. Even though there are possibilities mainly in the Belgian cities for better living conditions in small-scale, more individualized and better positioned housing solutions or even private rentals, that are scarce due to shortage, owners' discrimination and financial limitations. The housing service ecosystem is seemingly broad and adaptive, and more developed than in the Greek and French cases, still, due to severe funding and supply constraints de facto homelessness of UAMs or former UAMs can occur.

Calais is again an exception, as it is difficult to apply general standards to housing solutions and living conditions in informal camps, tents, evictions in every 48 hours and conditions that fall below basic hygiene standards; it is rather a homeless status than anything else. These conditions barely ensure physical survival, even if interpreted them as reflecting the transitory nature of UAMs' stay in Calais. Instead, even in such extreme circumstances, the goal should be to secure the fundamental human and children's rights find to meet basic needs in a dignified manner, which is maintained by insufficient funded NGOs and grassroots and poorly motivated state structures.

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Financial precarity of UAMs affects profoundly all children in UAM-care, and later as young adults after turning 18 with theoretically more opportunities for work and income. Even when financial provision for housing is available, administrative delays during housing transitions often cause acute hardship. A Liège stakeholder emphasized: *"It's the first time you've rented the apartment; they don't pay quickly; they take their time. (…) When you don't have the money, that's the problem".*

Educational barriers are also general across the six cities albeit with differences, embedded into limited, often less individualized and segregated educational frameworks. In Calais, education is barely on the table due to the limited time that UAMs intend to spend there, and their fear of being hindered in their journey to the UK. At the other end of the scale are Belgian cities that offer language schools for catch up that should be followed by enrolment to mainstream education. However, drop-outs often occur at this point as many UAMs end-up in segregated, lower quality schools or they are often oriented more quickly towards vocational schools regardless of potential, as some stakeholders in Ghent and Brussels told. A Ghent stakeholder observed: *"I see so much potential that is not accessible through normal schooling"*. In Liège, teacher absenteeism disrupts continuity and offers very limited opportunities for already vulnerable children to gain future potentials through education. In the two Greek cities stakeholder interviews suggest that educational services are not in the forefront of the priority list when it comes to UAMs provision which indicates that long-term integration is not in the focus.

Mental health seems to be a major issue and an obstacle to a decent future of UAMs in all six cities. It was assessed as a "least adequate domain" in Athens and Piraeus and barely addressed in Calais. The best situation among the six localities researched is in the Belgian cities, where psychosocial distress, isolation, and issues related to transition to adulthood are addressed in some ways, however, due to very limited capacities compared to the high demand, this service is still highly insufficient. An initiative by a minor in Ghent tackles pervasive loneliness who applied to a "buddy program" specifically to escape isolation that reflects the relevance of the issue and the relatively easy solutions that might be applicable in a more centralized and formal way.

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6.2.4. INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION AND AGE ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

A core concern among stakeholders is the violation of rights during administrative and law enforcement interactions. Stakeholder accounts cover a wide range of potential rights violations that they are aware of while UAMs are navigating bureaucratic processes and social services. These issues often stem from the tension between the migration vs child rights-based approach of which the previous is often superior over the latter in the bureaucracy and law enforcement.

One typical area of violation is age assessment. The process itself is a violation of child rights and serves policing purposes. In Brussels, the process is criticized due to its unclear methodology and evaluation procedure that creates intense fear among UAMs, according to stakeholders. A Ghent stakeholder noted: *"It gives a lot of stress to UAMs. They say it is an outdated procedure that is not so reliable"*. The results of the age assessment are often arbitrary, as illustrated by an extreme case cited earlier in the UAM account, in which the results of one such age assessment procedure showed that several young people assessed simultaneously were exactly 21 years and 6 months old, which is rather unlikely in the case of testing several individuals at the same time.

A stakeholder in Brussels highlighted another case that shed light on the stress that the age assessment procedure puts both on minors and stakeholders involved, as well as what unrealistic outcomes occur: *"Almost all had a doubt on the age emitted by the Office des Étrangers, and so they were going, they were sent to hospital, and they were passing those age tests, and we were receiving the results, and we had to inform them - it was horrible, because it was completely crazy. There are really some tests we were like, it's impossible how they got to this conclusion? We had like a mini guy of 16, from Afghanistan, and he received, like, 25 we were like, but did you see him?"*

Stakeholders in Belgium also emphasize that both the process and the results of age assessments are often problematic, potentially causing distress or harm to minors. The procedural delays and administrative burdens might be significant, particularly when legal action is required to contest findings. Additionally, the appeals process lacks uniformity, with results varying significantly. One professional described the impact on a boy with suicidal tendencies: *"That was really not okay. That boy had suicidal tendencies and wanted to attempt suicide. That has a huge impact on a boy who knows nothing about Belgium. He doesn't know. He doesn't understand why. And he often asked, "Why?" And you can't answer that, because you don't know why either. And that's the difficult part."*

6.EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD: FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH UAMS AND STAKEHOLDERS

It closely links to other types of institutional discrimination in its migration-focused approach. A Brussels stakeholders summed it up clearly: *"There is a kind of original discrimination, and that is the one that they are considered as "unaccompanied foreign minors": they are first of all considered as "foreign minors" and then "minors", so as I told you, they fall under Fedasil, not under the Child Protection authorities. If the police find a 14-year-old Belgian boy, alone somewhere, or a foreigner minor, they follow two completely different paths. So, in a way, there is a discrimination."* Police violence and harassment is another specific area where human and child rights violations can occur. This is another clear example of the legal approach that unaccompanied minors are perceived and treated as foreigners and subject to law enforcement, rather than minors with needs and rights. According to stakeholders and accounts from unaccompanied minors, such violence occurs primarily in border areas but can also occur in cities. A stakeholder in Athens mentioned that identification processes sometimes involve *"prolonged administrative detention"* where minors are *"confined in locked cells"* and face *"verbal abuse and deprivation of food"*. In Calais, *"regular evictions of informal living sites... further complicates contact with UAMs"* and occurs with *"no child protection mechanism"* in place.

6.2.5 LACK OF AFTERCARE AFTER THE AGE OF 18

As in previous sections highlighted, stakeholders also perceive the transition to adulthood as the most critical structural rupture. According to interviews in Athens and Piraeus, UAMs face *"sudden exclusion from housing and support"* the moment they turn 18. One respondent described this gap as preventing *"real integration"* and *"slowing down the improvement of their adult lives"*.

Stakeholders in Brussels and Ghent emphasize that turning 18 *"changes the entire support structure"*. Even when legal status is obtained, finding affordable housing is nearly impossible due to *"discrimination by landlords refusing to rent to UAMs"*.

7.IDENTIFIED SERVICE AND POLICY GAPS

Following the outcomes of the interviews with UAMs and stakeholders, there are some important findings, which reflect on the most pressing needs and gaps. In some cases, the outcomes of interviews also highlight the different views of UAMs and local stakeholders on access to services. This chapter summarises the main identified gaps in service provision and policymaking.

7.1. LACK OF LOCAL POLICIES ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF UAMS (INCLUDING COORDINATION AMONG POLICYMAKERS, SERVICE PROVIDERS)

The interests of UAMs are lost among the levels of public administration. Certain services and forms of support fall under the authority of national public administration bodies (for example, ministries), while in other cases the regional and/or local administration is responsible. Furthermore, the local public authorities and service providers do not provide the necessary support and equal access. Even if policies addressing the needs of UAMs exist at national level, these do not necessarily exist in the cities concerned.

7.2. LACK OF POSSIBILITIES FOR LOCAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The accounts of UAMs collected in the six cities suggest that unaccompanied children are more often perceived and treated as refugees rather than vulnerable children entitled to the same rights and similar services as native-born vulnerable children in the host country. The child rights-based approach would be in line with fundamental international legal and policy frameworks, i.e. the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Strategy on Child Rights.

A primary finding is the disconnect between state-level migration management and municipal-level service provision. In Athens and Piraeus, the system is highly centralized under the Ministry for Asylum and Migration, which delegates the mandate of service provision (accommodation, social support, legal aid, health) to NGOs such as Arsis and Zeuxis. Municipality authorities are notably not involved in any kind of service and support provision, as they are officially not included in the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for UAMs. Similarly, services provided for UAMs in Belgium is also based on a centrally governed refugee care system, primarily at national and to some extent at regional levels, with limited room for local level services. Calais in France is a distinct case due to the highly mobile nature of UAMs arriving to this area which is considered just a quick stop rather than a long-term integration place to settle. The deliberately temporary stay of UAMs is also reflected in the deficient service provision both at central and local levels, which is mainly delivered by NGOs with less state-level elements involved than in the other cities and countries in this research.

7.IDENTIFIED SERVICE AND POLICY GAPS

7.3. STRUCTURAL GAPS IN LONG-TERM SUPPORT AND ACCESSING SERVICES

While services and support in most of the cases are available until the age of 18 for children in the asylum system, continued support after transition to adulthood is broken, especially in the following areas:

- Lack and/or limited access to local public services: UAMs may face limited access to public services both before and after the age of 18. Instead, other stakeholders might, such as non-governmental organisations replace service provisions, which do not necessarily ensure sustainable support.
- Lack of transitioning to adulthood: After the age of 18, support and access to services is often limited or missing due to the lack of continued support. UAMs might not be involved in the general aftercare services, available for other children deprived from parental care. This should lead to housing insecurity and socio-economic marginalization.
- Lack or limited access to foster care results in residing in reception facilities, segregated group homes and may contribute to homelessness in a long run. Foster care may provide permanent solutions for accessing to good quality, inclusive public services and better perspective in social integration.
- Psychosocial support: Access to psychosocial support is very limited for UAMs, due to long waiting lists, lack of appropriate response to the identified needs, and trauma-informed care.

7.4. BARRIERS IN ACCESSING GOOD QUALITY, INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Access to good quality, inclusive education is a core factor to integration of UAMs. Due to the structural barriers identified, UAMs do not have equal access to quality education, which also hinders access to jobs and in general to labour market. The gap is primarily caused by the followings:

- Enrolment in reception and language classes hinders access to mainstream education, as these services represent a strong barrier in transitioning to inclusive education.
- Discriminative treatment: UAMs are often enrolled in segregated education (e.g. reception classes), and furthermore they are not welcomed by mainstream education. Furthermore, UAMs may also experience bullying or racism from peers and teachers in educational facilities.
- Access to higher education: UAMs are often directed to low-skilled vocational tracks, not taking into account their academic needs and potential.

7.IDENTIFIED SERVICE AND POLICY GAPS

7.5. LACK OF, OR LIMITED TO, ACCESS TO JUSTICE

UAMs face discriminative treatment and abuse in accessing public services and everyday life. At the same time, their access to justice and enjoying fundamental rights is limited. Compared to other minors facing similar challenges, UAMs do not enjoy equal rights in accessing services and social integration pathways. Furthermore, the needs of UAMs are not properly assessed (including listening to their voice in mainstream platforms) and responded by service provision and policymaking. All these above represent the violation of fundamental rights of UAMs, enshrined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Charter.

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy recommendations are based on the outcomes of the quantitative and qualitative research conducted among unaccompanied children and local stakeholders. It also reflects the EU legal and policy frameworks (see annex 1) and the main findings of the broader literature review, which highlight the identified gaps, discrimination in accessing local public services by unaccompanied children. All six local reports from the respective cities described important policy recommendations, which are summarised in this chapter.

The policy recommendations are primarily addressed to local stakeholders e.g. local authorities, local service providers, but they are also relevant for regional and national stakeholders. This chapter is divided by the main thematic areas, where policy gaps are explored and there is a strong need to address them.

8.1 NEED FOR LOCAL POLICIES, STRONGER GOVERNANCE AND LOCAL OWNERSHIP

Developing local policies, including better coordination and governance, represents a crucial element in responding to the identified needs and challenges of UAMs. It should also help in reducing the fragmentation between federal, regional, and municipal / local-level actors. Local policy-making should include the following:

- All relevant stakeholders should be involved in design, implementation and monitoring of local policies. Special attention should be paid to the involvement of local civil society organisations and UAMs.
- Both national and EU funds should be available for the implementation of the measures, identified by the local policies.
- Recognition of competence and roles of local authorities and local service providers in service provision for UAMs.
- Public services, organised by national and/or regional authorities (taking into account its primary focus on migration services) should not replace local, mainstream services.
- Local coordination mechanisms or municipal coordinating bodies should establish the cooperation among health, education, housing and social services, and the support by guardians.
- Services provided by non-governmental organisations should be an important element, but it should not substitute local service provisions. Local authorities should develop close cooperation and provide support for NGOs to ensure good quality local services.
- Policymaking should integrate the needs of UAMs and the corresponding responses into -, broader child/ youth-focused policies to ensure equal rights in all relevant policy areas.
- Disaggregated data on UAMs should be available for monitoring access to local services and progress in socio-economic integration.

8.POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

8.2 ENHANCING ACCESS TO LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICES

To uphold the rights of the child, the administrative processes must be simplified, child-friendly and multilingual. It should cover the followings:
- Child-friendly information and linguistic support: The systematic use of interpreters is required to address communication gaps in local services.
- Staff training: Public employees - including police, school staff, and hospital personnel - require specialized training in child rights, trauma-sensitive care, and anti-discrimination.
- Unconditional access: access to services should be de-linked from migration status "conditionality." Instead all local services should be available (including mobile outreach teams) for UAMs, regardless of a minor's residence status or their intent to stay in the country or not . Moreover, a 'firewall' should exist between the services and the migration enforcement, so that all children and adults can access services without fear of migration-related repercussions, such as arrest, detention, or deportation.

8.3 ACCESS TO FAMILY-BASED CARE

To ensure family-based care and family environment, when in the best interests of the child, UAMs should have equal access to foster care, comparable to other children deprived of parental care. It should include:
- Involvement in the mainstream child protection services and access to foster/adoption services.
- Provision of individual service provision, based on the identified needs of UAMs.
- Recruitment and training of foster parents on specific needs and challenges faced by UAMs, including a non-discrimination regulation on fostering process.
- Other alternative care arrangements which should prioritise independent living conditions and equal access to services.

8.4 EQUAL ACCESS TO SERVICES AND SUPPORT AFTER THE AGE OF 18

Aftercare support and plans should be provided after the age of 18, considering the critical vulnerability of UAMs at this age. It should include:
- Extended follow-up after guardianship: UAMs should benefit from extended support and follow-up after guardianship ends until age 25, as other children deprived of parental care.
- Access to housing: UAMs should have equal access to housing services, similar to other care leavers. It should include access to independent, non-segregated housing, small-scale, dispersed housing units, "Supported Independent Living" (SIL) schemes, cooperative housing, co-housing. It should provide a safe environment and primarily prevent homelessness.
- Transition to adulthood: UAMs should have access to services also provided for children deprived from parental care in the context of transiting to adulthood. It should include rent assistance, adult education and psychosocial support aiming to gain sustainable independent living.

8.POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

8.5 EQUAL ACCESS TO NON-SEGREGATED, INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (BOTH VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND ACADEMIC PATHS) AND EMPLOYMENT

UAMs should have unconditional access to mainstream, non-segregated education, regardless of their ethnicity, disability status, or any other dimension. It should also include the following aspects:

- Combating segregation: All segregated classes and schools should be eliminated and UAMs should have access to mainstream, inclusive education. Language and other barriers should be addressed in the mainstream, inclusive schools to avoid enrolment in segregated language/reception classes, schools.
- Flexible educational mechanism: The needs of UAMs should be addressed by the educational system and the system should provide flexible solutions. It should consider the need for income generation, family situation, psycho-social support, etc.
- Transition to safe and sustainable employment: vocational training and employment options should be based on the needs and wishes of UAMs. It should also include reinforced public-private partnership and contribute to sustainable employment and income generation.

8.6 ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Considering the significant impact of discriminatory treatment and abuse of UAMs in accessing local services, equal, child-friendly and accessible complaints mechanisms and the justice system should be guaranteed. This should help to respond to the identified discrimination and provide the required legal assistance. It should include the following:

- UAMs should have access to free legal aid, counselling, assistance and representation by UAMs, also with the close involvement and support of guardians.
- Direct cooperation with human rights organisations and lawyers, specialised in responding to discriminatory treatment of UAMs.
- Training and capacity building of free legal aid, legal counselling and legal assistance services (both public and organised by civil society organisations) to better understand the needs and challenges faced by UAMs.

8.POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

8.7. STRENGTHENING THE VOICES OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

The needs and challenges that UAMs face should be identified and addressed in the scope of service provision and policymaking. Furthermore, their priorities and recommendations should be linked to policy development and service design. It can be only addressed if the UAMs have possibilities to make their voice heard.

- UAMs should have access to mainstream child participation platforms (e.g. student councils, youth advisory boards and youth parliaments) where children are invited to express their needs and explain challenges.
- Local authorities, service providers and all other relevant stakeholders should assess the needs of UAMs and develop targeted responses in policymaking and service provisions.
- UAMs should also have the opportunity to participate in peer support groups to share their views and opinions.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This synthesis report demonstrates that across six European cities, unaccompanied children continue to experience systemic gaps in accessing local services face discrimination and abuse in their everyday life. While reception services are provided, the current service provisions remain largely shaped by migration management rather than by a child-rights-based approach. As a result, unaccompanied children are frequently treated as subjects of control instead of as rights-holders with long-term perspective for social integration.

The findings reveal recurring structural gaps: fragmented governance, limited access to mainstream local services, persistent discrimination in education and housing, insufficient mental health support, and a profound lack of continuity when children turn 18. This "age-out" rupture undermines prior investments in protection and integration, pushing many young people into precarity, homelessness, or exploitation precisely at the moment when support is most needed. These challenges are particularly acute in transit contexts such as Calais, but are also evident in destination cities where integration is formally prioritised.

Addressing these structural gaps requires a decisive shift from status-based, migration policy focused responses toward coordinated, fundamental rights-oriented service provision and policies that embed unaccompanied children within mainstream child protection, education, housing, and aftercare systems.

Ultimately, ensuring equal access, participation, and voice for unaccompanied children is a minimum requirement for all stakeholders. Local authorities, supported by national and EU-level frameworks, play a crucial role in translating legal obligations into durable protection and inclusion. Without such a shift, Europe risks perpetuating cycles of vulnerability; with it, unaccompanied children can be supported to become active, empowered members of societies.

REFERENCES

Based on the local reports prepared by the project partners:

- Athens and Piraeus in Greece: Greek Council of Refugees
- Liege, Ghent and Brussels in Belgium: Network of Afghanistan Diaspora Organisations in Europe (NADOE) and Caritas International Belgium:
  - Power2UAMs Local Report - Brussels
  - Power2UAMs Local Report - Ghent
  - Power2UAMs Local Report - Liège
- Calais in France: ECPAT France "Unaccompanied Minors in Transit in Calais: Service Provisions, Gaps and Policy Implications."

The local reports are available in English and local languages on the project website: https://bridge-eu.org/power2uams

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ANNEX 1 - LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AFFECTING UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Fundamental rights
The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union[42](Charter) provides that respect for fundamental rights is a legal obligation for the EU institutions, bodies, agencies and offices in all their actions, and for EU Member States when they are implementing EU law (cf. Article 51(1)). The following non-exhaustive list highlights the most relevant articles in the context of this report: - Article 14 Right to education,   - Article 18 Right to asylum,   - Article 21 Non-discrimination,   - Article 24 Rights of the child.
Child rights
Ratified by all EU Member States, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[43] underscores a number of key rights for children, including: - Article 2 Non-discrimination,   - Article 3 Best interest of the child,   - Article 12 Participation,   - Article 20 Protection of children without parental care   - Article 22 Refugee children   - Article 24 Access to healthcare,   - Article 28 Right to education.   General comment no. 5 is of particular relevance to this report, as it sets out the general measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and clarifies that States retain full responsibility for ensuring children's rights at all levels of governance, including where service provision and decision-making are devolved to local and regional authorities.[44]

[42] Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, C 326/391
[43]UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted 20 November 1989 by General Assembly resolution 44/25
[44]UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 5 (2003) General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC/GC/2003/5

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Migration and asylum

For children seeking asylum in the EU, until December 2025, the applicable legal frameworks were formed by the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). From January 2026, the Pact on Migration and Asylum came into force.[45] The Pact is constituted by several legislations, that address amongst others asylum procedures and reception conditions.[46]

In addition, for unaccompanied minors falling outside of the asylum system, additional legislations are relevant, such as the Schengen Border Code[47] and the Return Directive.[48]

Ethnic and racial discrimination

The Racial Equality Directive[49] sets out the obligation of all Member States to combat discrimination and to ensure that there is no discrimination on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, notably in social protection, education and access to and supply of goods and services, including housing.

Disability Rights

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[50] is an international human rights treaty intended to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. The following non-exhaustive list highlights the most relevant articles in the context of this report:

- Article 5 Equality and non-discrimination,
- Article7 Children with disabilities,
- Article 9 Accessibility,
- Article 12 Equality before the law,
- Article 13 Access to justice.

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[45] European Commission, 29 May 2024, Understanding the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

[46] Directive (EU) 2024/1346 of the European parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast); Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations (EU) 2021/1147 and (EU) 2021/1060 and repealing Regulation (EU) No 604/201

[47] Regulation (EU) 2016/399 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on a Union Code on the rules governing the movement of persons across borders (Schengen Borders Code) (codification)

[48] Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals

[49] Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin

[50] Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted 12 December 2006 by the Sixty-first session of the General Assembly by resolution A/RES/61/106

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EU funds
Every year, the European Union Union invests under shared management billions of euros advance a wide range of policy goals.[51] In the case of access to services, social inclusion and human rights, the European Social Fund (ESF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Asylum and Integration Fund (AMIF) are particularly relevant. These funds are governed by a Common Provisions Regulation (CPR), which provides a unified framework for programming, monitoring, and financial management. It is important to note that during the 2014–2020 period, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the Internal Security Fund (ISF) were not covered by the CPR and operated under separate sector-specific regulations. From 2021–2027, these funds fall under the CPR, alongside others such as the ESF+ and ERDF.[52]

[51] The current EU budget is over €2.0 trillion. It consists of the EU's 2021-2027 long-term budget of €1.2 trillion topped up by the up to €800 billion NextGenerationEU recovery instrument for the years 2021 to 2026. See the European Commission website for more information.
[52] For more information about the 2021-2027 programming period, consult the European Commission website: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2021-2027_en

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ANNEX 2 - POLICY FRAMEWORKS AFFECTING UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Fundamental rights
The *Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU*[53] confirms a renewed commitment to ensure that the Charter is applied to its full potential. As of 2021, the Commission presents an annual report, which looks into how the Member States apply the Charter in selected thematic area.
Child rights
The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child[54] and the European Child Guarantee[55] aim to ensure the protection of rights of all children, and secure access to basic services for vulnerable children. Children with a migrant background are listed as one of the target groups of the European Child Guarantee. The *Communication on the protection of children in migration*[56] (2017) sets out priority actions including ensuring protection upon arrival, adequate reception conditions for children, effective guardianship, early integration measures, access to inclusive and non-discriminatory education, timely access to healthcare etc. The *Recommendations on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child* (2024)[57] sets out a general framework of integrated child protection systems from which Member States, which places children at the centre of integrated child protection systems by adapting protection systems to children's needs and including children when taking decisions that impact them.

[53] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU, COM/2020/711 final
[54] Commission Communication, EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, COM/2021/142 final
[55] Council Recommendations (EU) 2021-1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee, L 223/14
[56] Commission Communication, The protection of children in migration, COM(2017) 211
[57] Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238 on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child

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Persons with disabilities
In 2010 the European Commission adopted a Disability Strategy for the period of 2010 to 2020[58] which sought to empower people with disabilities so that they can fully enjoy their rights and participate in society and the economy on an equal basis with others. It was followed by a new strategy for the period of 2021-2030[59] which sets out key initiatives in several themes including accessibility, EU citizenship rights, equal access and non-discrimination and independent living.
Ethnic and racial discrimination
The *EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025*[60] aims to strengthen the legal framework to combat discrimination, racism, xenophobia and identify potential gaps to fill. This was renewed early 2026 with the new strategy *Union of Equality: Anti-Racism Strategy 2026–2030*, which places structural racism and an intersectional approach its heart, and it is committed to mainstreaming anti-racism across policy areas. The Strategy explicitly encourages delivery on the European Child Guarantee, taking into account the disadvantages experienced of children with a migrant background.[61]
Migration
The Common basic principles for Immigrant integration[62] (2004) lay down the main principles for migrants' integration at EU level.

The *Action plan on the integration of third country nationals*[63] (2016) provides a framework and concrete actions to support Member States' efforts in developing and strengthening their integration policies, including education, language training, employment and vocational training, access to basic services such as housing and healthcare and active participation and social inclusion, fighting discrimination. |

[58] Commission Communication, European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe, COM/2010/0636 final
[59] Commission Communication, Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, COM/2021/101 final
[60] Commission Communication, A Union of equality : EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025, COM/2020/565 final
[61] Communication from the commission to the european parliament, the council, the european economic and social committee and the committee of the regions Union of Equality: Anti-Racism Strategy 2026-2030, COM(2026) 12 final
[62] Common Basic Princoples for Immigrant Integration Policy in the European Union, 19.XI.2004
[63] Commission Communication, Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals, COM(2016) 377

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The Council Conclusions on the integration of third-country nationals legally residing in the EU[64] (2016) invites Member States to focus their efforts on the following areas in accordance with the national policies and priorities on a number of areas including early integration measures, in particular those favouring early access to education, to vocational training and to the labour market, including a focus on introductory and language courses, but also areas offering opportunities to third-country nationals to actively participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural life of Member States; combating discrimination and segregation.

The Action Plan on integration and inclusion for 2021–2027[65] promotes inclusion for all, recognising the important contribution of migrants to the EU and addressing the barriers to the participation and inclusion of people with a migrant background.

[64] Council Conclusions on the integration of third-country nationals legally residing in the EU, 9 December 2015, 15312/16
[65] Commission Communication, Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, COM/2020/758 final