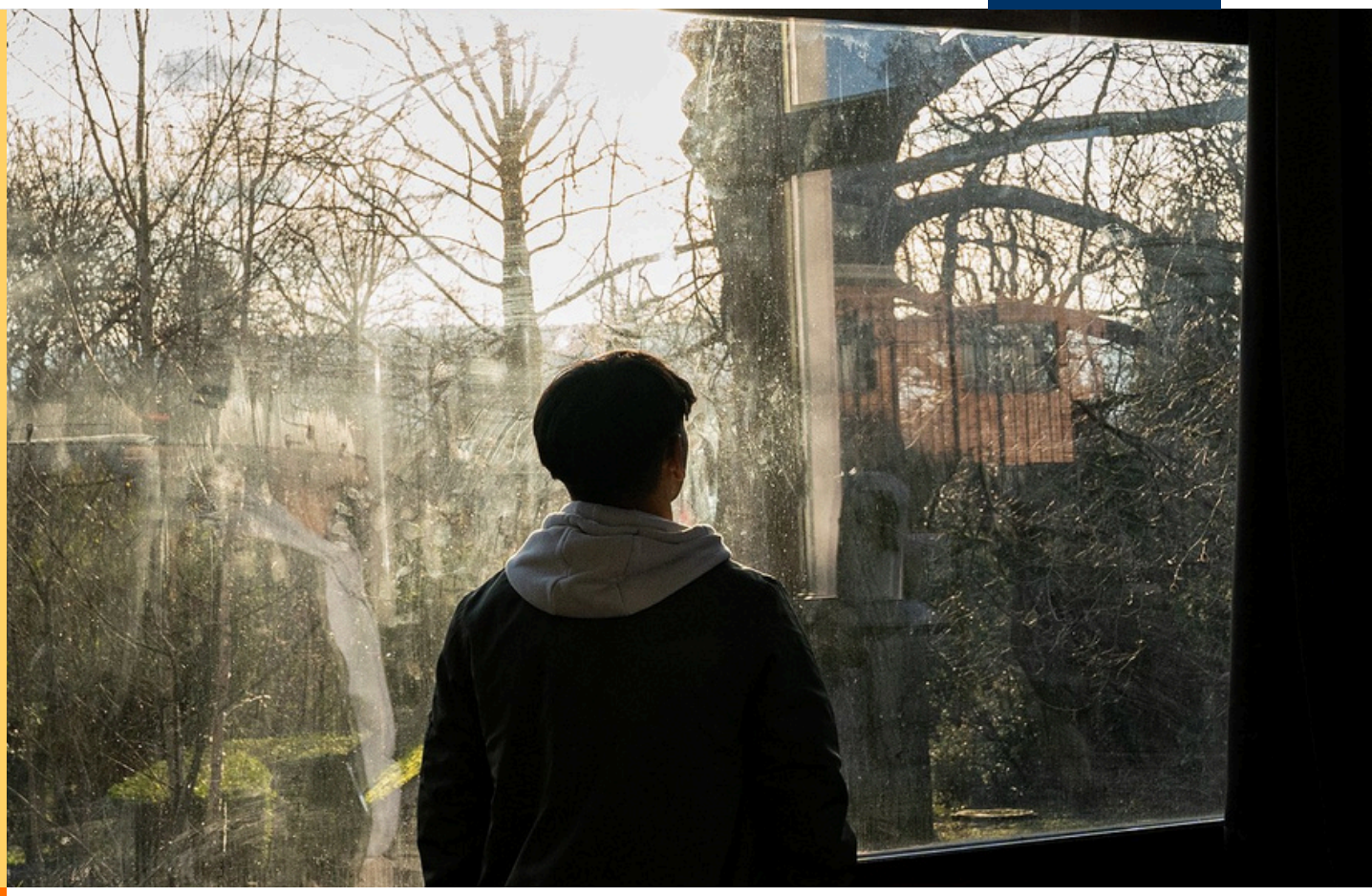
Power2UAMs: Local report Brussels



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NADOE
Network of Afghanistan Diaspora Organisations in Europe

This report has been prepared with the support of the European Union as part of the EU funded project: Power to UAMs: Ensuring Equal Access, Participation, and Voice at the Local Level (Power2UUAMs, grant agreement number 101190452, CERV-2024-CHILD).

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WITH THE SUPPORT OF:

Tarki & Bridge EU

DATE

December 2025

IMAGES

Co-funded by the European Union

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This local report, prepared by Caritas International and NADOE within the framework of the Power2UAMs project, explores the situation of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Brussels, by focusing on integration and wellbeing of UAMs, identifying unmet needs, assess public services, and good practices at the local level.

The research, conducted between May and November 2025, combined desk and literature review, stakeholder mapping, and qualitative interviews with 11 UAMs and 14 stakeholders from key organizations, including reception centers, NGOs, integration and youth services, and public authorities.

Findings reveal that Belgium's system for UAMs continues to operate in the tension between immigration control and child protection, often meaning that access to essential local level services — including housing, healthcare, education, and social welfare — frequently depends on administrative status rather than the universal principle of child protection. As a result, UAMs outside the asylum procedure face exclusion from basic support and opportunities for integration.

At the governance level, the system remains fragmented across federal, regional, and municipal structures. This multi-layered landscape produces inconsistent practices, bureaucratic delays, and gaps in service continuity. The guardianship system functions as a key protective mechanism and is often the most reliable entry point to basic rights. However, access to services can be restricted in the absence of a guardian.

While the guardianship system and education programs such as OKAN/DASPA constitute important pillars of support, UAMs face ongoing barriers in accessing adequate housing, healthcare, mental health support, and inclusive pathways into mainstream secondary and tertiary education. In education, capacity shortages, long waiting lists, and rigid language-first approaches delay or limit entry into mainstream schooling, while UAMs are often steered toward low-skilled vocational tracks regardless of their potential. In housing, limited availability of small-scale, individualized solutions and widespread discrimination in the private rental market undermine stability, particularly for young people transitioning out of reception facilities.

The transition to autonomy after turning 18 emerges as a particularly fragile phase. Many young people struggle to secure stable housing or to remain in education due to insufficient aftercare, a lack of supported independent living options, and weak bridging mechanisms between education, training, and employment.

Civil society organizations—including Caritas International, Maison Babel, Mentor Jeunes, and BelRefugees—play a crucial role in bridging service gaps by providing personalized legal, psychosocial, reception and integration support. However, their work remains heavily dependent on unstable project funding, potentially limiting long-term impact. Despite these systemic shortcomings, professionals across sectors demonstrate strong commitment, collaboration, and growing expertise in supporting UAMs. Encouragingly, UAMs interviewed expressed motivation, resilience, and a strong desire to pursue education, work, and community engagement in Belgium.

Based on these findings, the report recommends:

- Securing stable, long-term funding for organizations working with UAMs.
- Expanding small-scale, non-segregated housing solutions that meet the same quality standards as those within the youth care system, and supported independent living for UAMs over 15 years of age to transition to independence.
- Strengthening inclusive education pathways by embedding language support in mainstream schooling, and preventing premature tracking into low-skilled vocational routes.
- Ensuring multilingual, child-friendly services and training professionals on UAM-specific issues.
- Simplifying administrative procedures, particularly for social welfare and healthcare access.
- Developing stronger bridging programs linking education, training, and employment, alongside community-based initiatives that foster social inclusion.

Overall, while Brussels hosts a strong network of dedicated actors, sustained policy attention, funding, and coordination are essential to ensure that all unaccompanied minors can access protection, autonomy, and opportunities to build a dignified life.

1. INTRODUCTION OF THE LOCAL REPORT

The Power2UAMs project aims to ensure equal access, participation, and voice for unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in the asylum system and in transit, in line with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The project begins with local-level research to identify the unmet needs of UAMs and to assess local social policies and services in Athens, Piraeus, Brussels, Ghent, Liège, and Calais, through the work of partners in Greece (GCR), Belgium (NADOE and Caritas International), and France (ECPAT). The research methodology includes desk research, literature review, stakeholder mapping, and interviews with UAMs and stakeholders. The research is coordinated by TARKI Social Research Institute across the six localities.

2. METHODOLOGY

For the basic quantitative information on the locality and country, Caritas International and NADOE consulted several official sources, including Statbel (the Belgian statistics agency), CijferbankBrussel.be (official website with statistics from the Flemish government), Bisa.Brussels (Brussels institute for statistics and analysis), OECD (Organization for economic co-operation and development), data from the Immigration Office, Fedasil (the federal reception agency), and the Guardianship Service. An updated overview of reception facilities in the three cities was obtained from Fedasil. The stakeholder mapping drew on internal Caritas and NADOE networks (e.g., legal guardians and youth programs in Brussels) and was complemented by an online search to identify additional organizations supporting UAMs in Brussels.

As interviews progressed, new contacts were added based on recommendations from interviewees. Support from the Power2UAMs advisory board further helped in identifying key actors. The literature review covered reports and publications from institutions such as IBZ, Fedasil, the Guardianship Service, AIDA, and ECRE, as well as academic sources and national media outlets. While national-level data was relatively accessible, local-level research on UAMs remained limited.

In total, 11 UAMs and 14 stakeholders were interviewed in Brussels, including representatives from reception centers, foster care services, NGOs, integration services, and youth organizations. The UAMs interviewed (10 boys and one girl, aged 15–22) represented diverse nationalities and residence statuses. Conducting interviews mainly over the summer and into early autumn initially presented some logistical challenges, particularly as many professionals were on leave or occupied with the start of the school year. Engaging minors also required additional sensitivity and flexibility, and trusted intermediaries such as legal guardians often played a key role in facilitating their participation.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW, DESK RESEARCH

3.1. UAMs in Belgium and Brussels

Belgium's population is diverse in terms of nationalities and ethnic background, and this diversity is increasing. The share of Belgians with a Belgian background has decreased from 79.3% in 2005 to 71.4% in 2015, and 64.0% in 2025. The share of Belgian citizens with a foreign background has increased by 4.7 percentage points in the last decade and the proportion of non-Belgian citizens has increased from 11.2% in 2015 to 13.8% in 2025[1].

The number of people applying for international protection in Belgium reached a peak in 2015 with 39.064 applicants making a first request. In 2016 numbers dropped drastically after which they started to increase again every year. Even though there is a big reception crisis in 2024, the numbers are still lower than those in 2015 with 33.146 applicants making a first request[2].

[1] Belgian population structure
[2] National statistics - Belgian Immigration Office

Due to the reception crisis, many applicants for international protection in Belgium, especially in Brussels, depend on humanitarian organizations for basic needs, as emergency accommodation is often full and waiting lists are common. While reception of applicants for international protection is the responsibility of the state, many applicants who do not receive reception, or whose applications are denied, end up living on the streets in Brussels. To address the growing homelessness in Brussels (including among applicants for international protection), the state and municipality outsourced this service, as Fedasil and the Brussels Deal have provided some funding to other organizations (e.g. Samusocial, BelRefugees) to establish emergency reception[3].

The number of UAMs arriving in Belgium has been decreasing since 2022. The peak of arrivals was experienced in the year 2022 with 6,434 UAMs being registered for the first time by the Guardianship Service. In the subsequent years it decreased to 4,366 in 2023, 4,068 in 2024, and 2,320 in the first 8 months of 2025. Seasonal fluctuations occur each year, namely an increase in arrivals during the summertime and a decrease in arrivals during the winter. However, there is less consistent pattern over the years in terms of the nationalities arriving. In 2022, a high number of Afghan UAMs arrived in Belgium which dropped drastically since 2024. In contrast, the number of Eritreans and Somalians has been quite steady, while the arrival of Syrian UAMs is increasing, since at least 2020[4].

Even though the overall number of UAMs arriving in Belgium is decreasing, the occupancy levels in Fedasil's first and third phase reception facilities remain exceptionally high. Despite this, the government decided to reallocate some places initially intended for UAMs to accommodate families and adults. As a result, approximately 40% of the capacity of second-phase facilities was converted into places for families, which puts further pressure on the availability of adapted care for UAMs[5].

The list of main languages of refugees and UAMs per locality is not available in Belgium. Based on the top 5 nationalities among UAMs in Belgium the most spoken languages of UAMs for 2024 are Tigrinya, Dari, Pashto, Arabic and Ukrainian[6].

An article by De Graeve, Vervliet, and Derluyn (2017)[7] provides a highly relevant analysis of how Belgium's system for unaccompanied minors operates between immigration control and child protection. While grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, its structures are shaped by the idea of 'migration management' that distinguishes between categories of minors rather than their individual needs. For example, upon arrival, most UAMs are placed in the federal reception system instead of centers organized by the regional youth welfare system (though there are a few exceptions based on vulnerability criteria). The support given in the federal reception system does not adhere to the same quality criteria as in the youth welfare system, resulting in standardized procedures, limited attention to developmental needs, and unequal access to quality care and services compared to that provided by regional youth care.

This reflects an institutional tension between humanitarian concern for child welfare on the one hand, and restrictive migration control on the other, where protection is contingent on vulnerability categories rather than universal children's rights.

[3] https://emnbelgium.be/news/500-additional-places-are-made-available-asylum-seekers-homeless-shelter-network-brussels
[4] https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg_wetgeving_fundamentele_rechten_en_vrijheden#6
[5] www.caritasinternational.be/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Dashboard_2025Janv-Juin_FR.pdf
[6] https://justitie.belgium.be/nl/statistieken/dg_wetgeving_fundamentele_rechten_en_vrijheden#6
[7] Between Immigration Control and Child Protection: Unaccompanied Minors in Belgium

3.2. Reception centers and shelters

In July 2025, Belgium had a reception capacity of 35,322 places. With 33,160 people in the reception system, the occupancy rate was 94%. 1,836 people were on the waiting list for a place in the reception system[8].

UAMs in Belgium are, in principle, first accommodated in specialized reception facilities known as Orientation and Observation Centers (OOC). During this so-called first phase, an assessment is conducted to determine the specific needs of each child. Following this evaluation, the UAM is transferred to a second-phase reception center, where they reside until they receive a decision regarding their residence status. Once a UAM receives a positive decision, a transfer may take place to individual accommodation – the third phase - where the minor prepares for independent living until reaching the age of 18.

According to a mapping of shelters with available places for UAMs in Brussels City, a total of 522 places were identified within the official reception system, and 208 places in emergency reception shelters, distributed across different phases or functions (e.g., pre-reception, 1st phase, 2nd phase, and 3rd phase).

3.3 Relevant national, regional and local policies for UAMs

Various national, regional, and local policies are in place to address different needs of UAMs in Brussels.

3.3.1. Unofficial memorandum of understanding between two Brussels-based reception centers for minors in transit and the Brussels government (Local level)

Since May 2023 in Brussels, there is an informal arrangement between two reception centers (Centre Amran and Centre Dubrucq) that house UAMs in transit, who often intend to travel to the UK or other EU countries. Under this agreement, the centers are not required to report the minors' presence to authorities, allowing them to stay there for up to three months. While this provides temporary shelter and support, it operates outside the formal legal or policy framework and is not officially recognized. At the time of writing this report, the existence of these two centers is under pressure. The places that were initially reserved for unaccompanied minors may now be reoriented to accommodate adults.

3.3.2. Housing

Shortages of private housing in Brussels (and in Belgium in general) and limited capacity in local reception initiatives in the 3rd phase hinder the transition of UAMs over 15 and with residence status to independent housing. Due to housing shortages, UAMs must sometimes remain longer in reception centers or accept moving to another city or region, which disrupts their support networks, wellbeing, and schooling. There seems to be a lack of organizations in Brussels offering support to UAMs in searching adequate housing options.

3.3.3. Guardianship Service (Federal level)

Every UAM that arrives in Belgium is immediately entitled to a guardian, whose role is to assist with legal and administrative procedures, follow up on reception, education and to monitor the wellbeing of the minor. The guardianship is being managed at the federal level by the Guardianship Service, but it is the guardian that ensures minors have access to public services at the local level. However, a key limitation of this system is that, without a guardian, UAMs cannot access certain essential services – for instance, opening a bank account is not possible without one.

3.3.4. Family allowance system (Regional level)

After being granted residence status, UAMs residing in Brussels are entitled to child support and a social allowance. This is a monthly fee that varies depending on the age of the minor. This system differs from the regional child support systems in Flanders or in Wallonia, where UAMs already have access to this support while still being in residence procedure.

[8] Fedasil statistics

3.3.5. Public center for social welfare (CPAS/OCMW) (Federal/Local level)

After leaving the reception system, recognized refugees who are not yet working are entitled to social welfare. This includes

- a monthly income,
- an installation 'bonus' (a one-time financial contribution to help purchase furniture upon leaving a situation of homelessness (leaving the reception system is considered equivalent to a situation of homelessness by the state)),
- assistance of a social worker
- financial support with medical expenses, if necessary.

UAMs are also entitled to access the social welfare system, if the need can be proven, and if the minor is not an applicant for international protection. (UAMs still in the asylum procedure receive material aid from Fedasil).

While the OCMW/CPAS operate within a federal legal framework, they provide their services on a local level. Each OCMW/CPAS is joined with the municipal, local government and is limited to the territory of said municipality. As such, whilst these organizations offer the same opportunities and forms of aid, the technical application may differ and local governments may offer extra benefits, beyond the federal scope.

3.3.6. DASPA/OKAN (Regional level)

This is a type of schooling offered to all foreign-speaking, newcoming minors, between 12 and 18 years old. In Flanders this is called OKAN, in Wallonia this is called DASPA, in Brussels both are possible depending on the chosen language. The goal is to focus for a period of, on average, 1 year on language acquisition (Dutch or French) and integration, after which the students can enter classes in secondary education. Although this structure provides students with a safe and supportive environment in which to develop linguistic competencies, it frequently results into de facto segregation. OKAN classes are often organized in separate classrooms, and in some cases even distinct wings or buildings, thereby limiting interaction with the wider school population[9]. In primary education this system does not exist. Younger children (below 12) of newcomers often attend the same classes as their Belgian peers.

Local capacity in OKAN/DASPA classes in Brussels is not always sufficient, leading to UAMs sometimes waiting for several months before being able to start school. Several schools in Brussels offer DASPA or OKAN, although no specific data on their capacity was available.

Existing research indicates that unaccompanied minors (UAMs) consistently place a high value on educational attainment; however, structural characteristics of the educational system often constrain their opportunities and outcomes. Following their initial year in DASPA or OKAN, UAMs are disproportionately represented in vocational and part-time vocational tracks, as well as in programs designed for learners with special educational needs. Conversely, they remain underrepresented in general and technical educational pathways that typically serve as preparatory routes for higher education.

Moreover, UAMs who reach the age of 18 or who lose residence status before completing their DASPA or OKAN year are at heightened risk of exiting the school system without obtaining a formal qualification[10].

3.3.7. Plan MENA (Regional level)

An agreement was concluded in 2015 between Fedasil and the government of the Wallonia-Brussels federation to create specialized reception places for vulnerable UAMs (often under the age of 15), managed by the youth welfare system (Service de l'Aide à la jeunesse - SAJ). A total of 130 places were established under this plan, which falls within second-phase reception.

[9] Refugee families after recognition
[10] Between Immigration Control and Child Protection: Unaccompanied Minors in Belgium

3.3.8. Health care (Federal level)

UAMs in Belgium are entitled to basic health insurance (*mutualité*) after attending school for 3 months. For those who do not have such insurance yet, Fedasil provides medical care for UAMs who are in the asylum procedure, while the CPAS/OCMW covers urgent medical needs for UAMs who are not applicants for international protection. Empirical studies indicate that UAMs in Belgium exhibit significantly higher rates of severe anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (worsened by traumatic experiences, daily stressors, and uncertainties in asylum procedures)—not only when compared to peers born in the host country, but also relative to refugee adolescents who came to Belgium with their parents. Despite these elevated levels of psychological distress, availability and accessibility of psychological and psychiatric services for UAMs remain insufficient, falling markedly short of addressing their substantial mental health needs[11].

3.3.9. Age assessment (Federal level)

Upon arrival in Belgium (or later in their residence procedure), the Guardianship Service, Immigration Office or other state actors can raise doubts on the declared age of the minor. At the moment, the age is being assessed with the so-called triple test: an X-ray of the collarbone, wrist, and teeth. The accuracy and reliability of this practice have been highly criticized in the medical world and by NGOs.

In 2024, 1,713 age assessment procedures were conducted in Belgium, and the Guardianship Service made 1,654 determinations, with just over 30% declared minors. Belgian rulings[12] clarified that official documents take priority over medical age assessments, which, in theory, are only supportive—although in practice we see this doesn't change much. In the cases where documents are present, they are often seen as falsified. The European Pact on Migration and Asylum prescribes a thorough reform of the age assessment procedure, including a multidisciplinary phase and the medical test as a last resort. These reforms are due in June 2026[13].

3.3.10. Family reunification

Family reunification is a complex procedure for which many refugees, and UAMs specifically, need help from professional organizations[14]. In Brussels, Caritas International provides this kind of assistance but has very long waiting lists. There is a strong need for organizations that offer assistance in this procedure. On top of that there is a lack of organizations that offer help with the administration and search for housing once the family arrives. The lack of assistance puts a lot of pressure on the minor who is already in Belgium. Recent legal changes (2024–2025) have restricted family reunification for UAMs, including a ban for those with subsidiary protection and a reduction of the application window for young adults from 12 to 3 months; civil society argues this timeframe is unworkable, and an appeal is pending[15].

3.4. Conclusions on services, programs, projects

Many of the services affecting the lives of UAMs in Belgium are organized at the federal level, with a limited impact from the local level. Only once UAMs leave the official reception system – typically after receiving residence status and reaching the age of 18 – do they access more public services on the local level. Key elements such as guardianship, age assessment, and reception policy are coordinated federally, while access to housing, education, and social services is shaped by regional and municipal implementation.

This results in dispersed policies for UAMs across federal, regional and local levels, leading to a fragmented governance landscape. While federal agencies (e.g. Guardianship Service, Immigration Office and Fedasil) ensure legal protection and basic services, regional and local initiatives provide educational, housing and integration support. This multi-tiered system can create inconsistencies in access and quality of services.

[12] https://www.vreemdelingenrecht.be/sites/default/files/media/files/2024-10/20230616_Rb_Luik.pdf
[13] https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en
[14] On the reconstruction of family life and 'institutional forms of care': Family reunification with unaccompanied minors in Belgium and Norway.
[15] Caritas International & ECRE

Informal agreements, such as the memorandum of understanding between Brussels-based reception centers, provide temporary shelter and protection for UAMs in transit. However, the lack of formal recognition and legal backing limits oversight, long-term planning, and the integration of such initiatives into official policy frameworks.

Structural gaps in service provision are highly prevalent, many of which mirror broader national dynamics, such as shortages of private housing and limited capacity in reception facilities that hinder the transition of UAMs to independent living. Also, language-focused integration programs (DASPA/OKAN) provide a supportive learning environment, but often also result in segregation and delayed access to mainstream education. Structural constraints within the educational system disproportionately channel UAMs into vocational or special-needs pathways, limiting their opportunities for higher education. Finally, despite entitlement to basic health insurance and medical care, the availability of psychological and psychiatric services remains insufficient to meet UAMs extensive needs.

4. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF UAM INTERVIEWS

4.1. Methodological notes

The interviews with UAMs were a combined quantitative and qualitative interview to explore the complexity of their social situation and unmet needs in depth. Recruiting UAMs in Brussels to be interviewed proved to be more challenging than engaging stakeholders in terms of time required, trust-building and applying multiple outreach strategies. While the target of at least 10 UAM participants was met, convincing minors to participate was difficult due to their preoccupation with asylum procedures, housing, or family reunification. Some organizations were either unable to assist because of workload or did not respond to requests. The most effective recruitment approach involved working through legal guardians, who could clearly explain the project and provide reassurance. Despite these efforts, the participation of girls and minors under 15 remained limited, reflecting their smaller representation and the protective stance of social workers.

Interviews were conducted in settings chosen for the minors' comfort, such as accommodation centers, offices, or public spaces. Some questions required simplification or translation, which occasionally risked guiding responses, while informal post-interview conversations often provided richer insights. Interviews typically exceeded one hour, and one case required particular sensitivity due to the participant's mental health. Despite these difficulties, the interviews offered valuable qualitative insights and quantitative data to understand UAMs' situation and unmet needs in Brussels.

4.2 Summary of interviews with UAMs

4.2.1 Basic information of UAMs interviewed

Altogether 11 UAMs were interviewed in Brussels, a diverse group of 10 boys and 1 girl, ranging in declared age from 15 to 22 years old. Their national backgrounds reflected the global breadth of forced migration to Belgium, including individuals from Syria, Afghanistan, Guinea, Colombia, Ukraine, DR Congo, and Eritrea, as well as one participant with dual Ukrainian-Lebanese nationality.

The reasons for leaving their home countries were predominantly linked to insecurity and violence, cited by 9 of the 11 participants. For several, this was compounded by other motivations, such as the pursuit of education (3 UAMs) or political circumstances (2 UAMs). Other less frequent but significant reasons included family conflict, orphanhood, the search for a better future, and pressures related to socio-cultural expectations—in one case, possibly connected to sexual identity or military conscription (as indicated by the respondent). These accounts highlight the overlapping drivers of migration that often go beyond a single push factor and are shaped by both structural and personal dimensions.

When discussing future mobility, the participants expressed a mix of stability and uncertainty. 6 of the UAMs intended to remain in Brussels. Others were more mobile or uncertain: 1 had imminent plans to move to another city, while 3 were considering relocation within Belgium, often contingent on completing education or improving their circumstances. 1 participant spoke of a long-term aspiration to move to Canada, and 2 others were undecided, largely due to ongoing asylum procedures that created a sense of instability and limited their ability to plan ahead. Living arrangements among the interviewees varied between both institutional and informal support systems. 4 UAMs lived with relatives—including uncles, aunts, or cousins—in private accommodation, while 3 others managed to live independently in private housing. Another 3 resided in Fedasil reception centers, and 1 participant was in a studio managed by Youth in Transit, a third-phase reception initiative run by Caritas International.

Most UAMs (7 out of 11) described their overall health as "good". However, this did not always align with their psychological wellbeing: 1 of these 7 also expressed uncertainty about his mental health, and several others mentioned daily difficulties. 3 UAMs rated their health as "moderate," and 1 as "very bad." 6 participants reported recurring health problems that affected their daily lives, mainly linked to psychological distress, such as panic attacks or suicidal thoughts, as well as the stress of the asylum procedure, perceived errors in age assessment, or the discomfort of poor reception conditions. Overall, physical health appeared relatively stable, while mental wellbeing was often fragile, highlighting the emotional toll of prolonged uncertainty and inadequate living conditions.

Educational backgrounds among the participants varied widely. 1 UAM had completed early childhood education, 3 had completed primary education, 5 had finished lower secondary, and 2 had completed upper secondary education—with 1 of the latter also having begun tertiary studies before migration.

At the time of the interviews, 1 UAM was enrolled in DASPA classes, 5 were pursuing upper secondary education, and 1 was preparing to start tertiary studies. 4 others were not currently attending school. Their situations reflected structural and personal barriers: 1 wished to study but was unable to because he had been declared an adult; another had recently arrived and had yet to enroll; 1 planned to begin Dutch language courses but faced delays due to bureaucratic and mental health challenges; and 1 remained undecided about continuing education.

4.2.2 UAMs' refugee and guardianship status

Among the 11 UAMs interviewed, 2 had received temporary protection status, while 9 had applied for international protection. Of these 9, 4 had already been granted refugee status, 4 were still awaiting a decision, and one case remained unclear, though it appeared likely that the individual had not yet applied.

Guardianship arrangements also varied considerably. 2 UAMs currently had an official guardian, while 5 had been assigned one until reaching the age of 18. 3 participants did not have a guardian due to age assessments classifying them as adults—one of whom was in the process of contesting this decision—and 1 participant had been an adult upon arrival in Belgium. These findings illustrate how administrative determinations of age can significantly affect access to protection and support mechanisms.

Finally, the research sought to include minors in transit; however, despite outreach to several shelters hosting this group, no minors in transit were available or willing to participate. This limited engagement points out the challenges of reaching highly mobile and often precarious migrant populations.

4.2.3 UAMs' needs and their assessment on legal and social services

Across interviews, UAMs expressed a range of needs that can be grouped into six main areas: financial support, education, legal and social support, housing, social connections, and other practical needs. Their reflections on services in Brussels revealed both appreciation for certain supports and persistent barriers. In particular, many UAMs highlighted long waiting times for administrative procedures and service applications, alongside frequent bureaucratic confusion and language barriers when interacting with municipal or social welfare offices.
On the other hand, support from non-profit organizations such as Caritas International, Mentor Jeunes, Exil, Maison Babel, and Collectif des Femmes was viewed very positively. These actors were often described as going "the extra mile"—providing personalized help, accompaniment, and translation support beyond their official mandates. Psychological assistance from NGOs and hospitals received mixed reviews, reflecting differences in frequency, cultural sensitivity, and language accessibility.

Financial support

Several UAMs emphasized the need for timely financial assistance after transitioning from reception centers to independent living. Delays in accessing OCMW/CPAS support created acute hardship, particularly when rent and basic furnishings had to be paid immediately. As one participant explained:

> ***"Yeah, this moment is true that I need monetary help because we are new in this place. The OCMW has not yet started giving us money. As you can see, even the house is empty because we haven't received anything. We're just living on the money that we had from before."***

Others mentioned the need for small business loans or flexible employment opportunities to achieve self-sufficiency. One respondent receiving financial support from CPAS mentioned that it was "good – they give you what you need to survive". However, several UAMs noted that some pocket money allowances were too low to meet basic needs, particularly for those earning small wages within centers.

Education

Education emerged as a major aspiration but also an area of exclusion for some. While several UAMs were able to study, others could not access school or courses due to their residence status or family circumstances. For instance, one single mother could not attend classes without access to childcare, and others were blocked from enrolment after being classified as adults following age assessments.

> ***"I still love my childhood. I wished I could go to school, but the situation was not good, so that's why I didn't go to school very well, yeah, I only spent four years. I was really quite small. But I still miss that time, and I still miss the school. I wish I could get some knowledge, like to be a person (that can) help others, like teacher... Many times they (municipality) say, "Oh, we are not allowed to give you the permission to go to work or school." So I'm feeling really hopeless and helpless as well."***

Others expressed a desire for more informal learning and language exchange opportunities, such as homework help or conversation practice. Schools were generally evaluated positively by those who were previously or currently at school. Many participants described teachers as supportive and empathetic, with education providing structure and emotional stability. While some reported issues such as racism or disorganization, most found school to be a key source of wellbeing and inclusion.

> ***"It is my childhood dream to continue with university and have a good level of studies, but life can be hard sometimes."***

Legal and Social Support

Access to legal and social assistance varied widely. Some minors described strong relationships with guardians or social assistants, while others experienced long delays in appointments or limited contact. Overall, it seemed that guardians played a big role in connecting UAMs to other activities, clubs, and organizations, widening the social network of the individual. Several UAMs who were declared to be over 18 lost access to guardians altogether, leaving them without representation to contest the decision. Another minor had to wait for the appointment of a new guardian after her first guardian fell ill, leading to a lot of stress.

> ***"I don't remember how long it took, but the main thing is like, because I know as a minor here in Belgium, once the guardian is appointed, the things go smoothly, meaning that you can see your lawyer, you can go to interview and stuff like that. So I had some of my friends, minors who had a guardian and things were moving faster for them. So I was a little bit stressed at that moment."***

Participants also described confusion or distress linked to complex asylum and appeal procedures. A few reported dissatisfaction with lawyers or psychological services (and a need for these types of services was mentioned), noting either minimal engagement or language barriers. On the other hand, 1 UAM who was receiving regular psychiatric and psychological care described the support as very good and beneficial for his wellbeing.

Some UAMs interviewed in this research stated being frustrated about long waiting times in administrative procedures and application of services, for example when asking for financial support at the social welfare system, when applying for a buddy, etc. Next to the long waiting times, there seems to be some bureaucratic, administrative confusion at the municipality or social welfare office: For example: 1 UAM explained he can't seem to get his orange card and doesn't understand why. Another testifies of difficulties in communication at the social welfare office when his family arrived. They needed a translator but there wasn't one available. This forced him to stay home from school to translate for them.

Housing and reception

Housing conditions of UAMs interviewed were often precarious. Moreover, those who had achieved or were awaiting family reunification reported overcrowding and/or difficulty finding larger or affordable apartments. Others remained in reception centers, which were often perceived as restrictive ("prison-like") and uncomfortable.

> ***"In a way, you say, 'No but wait, it feels a little bit like we're in a prison.' It's a little pitiful. So being in these kinds of conditions, not only for me but also seeing others in them, because I am someone who is very sensitive at heart... Seeing another person not doing well—it opens an emotional window that is very wide. It can affect me a lot. So yes, these are things that really touch me."***

Overcrowding, hygiene problems, poor food, and lack of heating were frequently mentioned. Some participants described deep emotional strain and loneliness in these settings.

> ***"I have such a problem (mental health). So sometimes it makes me feel really lonely and feel have to say, I, really like, hopeless, I don't have anyone, so sometimes it makes me cry."***

One respondent expressed a level of apathy with living conditions at the center, after having tried unsuccessfully to speak with the management about changes.

> ***"It's really sometimes the environment you live in that conditions you. I wrote a lot of emails to (Fedasil) management. I talked to people, all they replied was, "Okay, we'll solve the problem." That's all words, no change, no results. In the end, I'm alone, I can't change the world, I just make do [I will just do what I can]."***

Assessments of reception center staff were mixed. Some UAMs appreciated practical support—such as help with medical visits or banking—while others described indifference, poor communication, or misinformation.

> ***"You have to force them every single day nonstop to do that thing, even if you say it three times, and then stop asking, they won't care what you want."***

Social connections and family

The absence of family and limited opportunities for social contact were common themes. UAMs expressed the need for friendship, mentorship, and community engagement to reduce isolation. Some hoped for family reunification or sought informal networks, such as "buddies" to practice Dutch or participate in shared activities. Access to books, sports, or creative outlets was also mentioned as a way to cope with loneliness and uncertainty.

"In the summer I was in a camp for three days with Tunoso (a youth organization); we canoed; it was cool, with other young people... I was happy and laughing a lot."

Other practical needs

Several UAMs mentioned everyday needs such as access to transportation cards, winter clothing, and driver's licenses. Employment was another key concern: many wanted to work to support themselves or relatives abroad but faced administrative barriers.

4.2.4 UAMs' experiences with law enforcement, border police

The majority of interactions with law enforcement were limited and generally perceived as positive (most interviewees said they did not really have much interaction with police). In Belgium, interactions were minimal, mostly involving routine checks (e.g., bus ticket verification or domiciliation checks), with no negative experiences reported. Personal approach —being diplomatic and cordial— contributed to smooth interactions. However, one minor mentioned an interaction with border police in Belarus/Poland when on the move, where he said "they (police) catch you and they play with you, ah you don't feel human sometimes. But there in the cities, it's OK."

Two UAMs did mention encounters with the police. In one case, a participant was handcuffed and taken to the police station after being wrongly suspected of vandalism. He was later released when camera footage showed he was not involved, and the police called to apologize. He did not feel like the police mistreated him. Another participant described being taken to the station after forgetting his bus pass but stated that the officers "did what was necessary" and treated him correctly. These incidents illustrate that while misunderstandings can occur, they were resolved without further escalation or abuse.

4.2.5 UAMs' experiences with discrimination, violence

Most UAMs reported little or no direct experience of discrimination in Belgium. However, several described moments of frustration or discomfort that reflected subtle or indirect forms of exclusion. These included inflexibility or lack of understanding from kitchen staff in reception centers, rudeness or disrespect from some service providers, and occasional racist remarks from teachers. A few participants also mentioned perceived racism expressed through looks or attitudes, and 1 UAM described feeling uncomfortable when asked intrusive questions about his sexuality at an Ukrainian community center.

No respondents reported incidents of physical violence by service providers. Nonetheless, several reflected that the prolonged uncertainty of residence procedures and the constant threat of expulsion created psychological distress that could be experienced as a form of structural or emotional violence.

4.2.6 UAMs' experiences with the age assessment procedure

Among the 11 UAMs interviewed, 6 were not required to undergo an age assessment, as no doubts were raised regarding their declared age. 2 participants completed the procedure and felt that the results were accurate. As one explained:

"They gave me the correct age; it is okay and not okay at the same time... it is important, but some people you just see they are minor, why obligate them to do the test?"

3 others reported that the procedure assessed their age incorrectly, leaving them confused and distressed about the outcome. 2 of these later obtained birth certificates and were in the process of appealing the decision – one of whom declared to be less than 16 years old while his test declared him to be almost 22 years old.

"They just gave us all 22 (years)... If it was to be a real age test, I would have expected differences, but how come all of us got the same, 21 and 6 months? All of us... I did not feel satisfied with what they gave us."

While many UAMs acknowledged that such procedures can serve an administrative purpose, there was a strong sense of mistrust toward their fairness and accuracy. Several viewed the process as arbitrary and, in some cases, harmful, particularly when the outcome led to the loss of protection or access to support services reserved for minors.

"No, [I find it] a little bit discriminatory, I don't know, it's a little fishy like. Yeah, I understand what they are doing. I genuinely understand. Because many people come here, they're [not] like the same age as they are up here as they are [in real life]. But yeah, if you have something to prove your age [documents], I think you should consider what we are bringing to you."

5. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE SUMMARIES OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

5.1. Methodological notes

Recruiting stakeholders was relatively straightforward. Most were contacted via email, with an explanation of the project and a request to participate in an interview. Some local actors (e.g., a local reception and services initiative by CPAS in Uccle) were contacted several times to provide input on the topic, but ultimately did not respond. Finally, 14 interviews were conducted with representatives of a broad spectrum of actors: reception centers, emergency shelters, foster care services, legal guardians, the guardianship service, NGOs, youth organizations, integration services, and a lawyer. Stakeholders who participated in interviews were generally open and willing to share information. It seemed that people working with UAMs are passionate about the cause and so were mostly eager to share their expertise.

5.2. Summary of the interviews with stakeholders

5.2.1 organization types, positions, years of experience, qualifications of interviewees

14 stakeholders were interviewed, of which 8 were non-profit organizations, 5 were regional actors (two of the five were emergency centers running as non-profit but funded by Brussels region), and 1 was a state actor. They represented a range of positions, including project coordinators, team coordinators, center managers, and a policy advisor. Their roles spanned social work, guardianship (both professional and volunteer), legal support, foster care assistance, and oversight of housing and integration programs, with some focusing specifically on accompaniment of unaccompanied minors and prevention of exploitation.

Years of Experience: Several interviewees have longstanding careers, including one with over 25 years in the sector as a social worker with UAMs, and another with more than 20 years as a lawyer. Others reported 5–10 years of experience in refugee and migration-related organizations. A number are relatively new to their current positions (started in the past two years), though some bring prior professional background from related sectors.

Fields of education included law, social work & social policy, humanities & social sciences, international relations & diplomacy and business & management.

5.2.2. Number of UAMs they work with, their general challenges

Across the 14 interviews, the number of UAMs currently being supported by stakeholders varied widely depending on the organization, project and role of interviewee. Some interviewees reported working with small groups of between 3 and 25 minors (e.g. social workers, volunteer legal guardian, foster care assistant, some coordinators) and others indicated much higher numbers, ranging from about 50 to over 200 within specific projects or roles (e.g. lawyer, Guardianship Service, emergency reception center managers, or policy officer working on the topic of disappeared children).

"I am the bringer of bad news, it can happen that they don't come back. I am on their side, but they often have the impression that I am against them because I have to tell them something is not possible, this gives them the impression that I am working for the authorities. It is difficult to create a bond of trust (...) So it's disillusionment, it's the end of a lot of hope, of dreams. I'm a dream crusher, but it's not me, it's politics. And I am the messenger of a policy that I turn into procedural legal information. "

5.2.3. Assessment of services provided

The stakeholders we were able to interview provided different services such as emergency shelters, food and financial support, legal and administrative support, providing information, psychosocial and emotional support, housing support, improving access to health (facilitating visits to doctors, hospitals...), accompaniment/guidance towards autonomy, support in family reunification procedure, educational and vocational support and support in searching cultural and social activities.

Many stakeholders indicate that they do their best in the circumstances, but there is always room for improvement. The system of support of UAMs is seen as based on demand. More outreach is necessary. To access certain services, UAMs often need the help of a guardian. Without a guardian it becomes very difficult. At many services there are long waiting lists and the system is seen as sometimes lacking in that it cannot always address the UAM's needs immediately; there is a certain need of a UAM that needs to be translated by a guardian, who has to take official steps and often is being slowed down by waiting lists and difficult procedures.

Psychological care is often evaluated as insufficient. The services that exist do great work, but there are simply not enough services with experience in working with UAMs.
One stakeholder stated the system is definitely improving (compared to 15-20 years ago) but asked herself what the point is if UAMs lose all these rights and access to services if they turn 18 without a residence permit.

"On the other hand, it's all a bit of a circus, because in fact, in my opinion, we treat them better and better, we welcome them better and better, the professionals are better and better, but in the end, we have fewer and fewer opportunities to obtain residence permits because migration policy is stricter. So I don't really understand the point of it all, because we're treating these kids better and better, but then when they turn eighteen, we throw them out on the street."

Another stakeholder – a longtime social worker for UAMs – reflected a similar sentiment: while the UAM protection system has improved drastically since when she first began working in this field, the most persistent forms of "mistreatment" today stem from administrative delays and the chronic shortage of affordable housing. These challenges often leave young people waiting months for financial aid or struggling to secure stable accommodation, despite having legal residence and entitlements.

The following service gaps on the local level were identified by the interviewed stakeholders: insufficient access to psychological care, lack of specialized accommodation for UAMs with specific needs (e.g. severe mental health issues; for minors not in the asylum system, such as 'mineurs en errance' or 'wandering minors'), language barriers at social welfare offices and municipality, lack of assistance in search for housing, limited support in transition to autonomy or post-18 years, need for more educational programs where it is possible to combine education with work (or internships for those who face language or education barriers and are not work-ready), need for more support of UAMs to access secondary or tertiary education and a need for more small-scale reception centers, with the same quality standards as existing in the youth welfare system. Specifically for trafficked and/or disappeared minors: a limited recognition of trafficking indicators, low victim self-identification, and fragmented local case management hinder effective support for exploited minors.

It is important to recognize the diversity of UAM profiles and situations. While the asylum procedure and residence status fall under federal (rather than local) responsibility, these factors decisively shape a young person's access to services and support—as well as on the types of assistance they seek or require. Several organizations interviewed reflected this reality: for instance, some only accompany or provide services to minors with specific residence status such as an *orange card* or *annex 26*, or even to those who already hold refugee or subsidiary protection status.

A center manager for minors in transit described the extensive administrative challenges involved in securing emergency medical care for youth without a *mutuelle* (public health insurance). Although such minors are legally entitled to *emergency health care*, the application process—requiring medical certification, a social inquiry, and temporary authorization—can take up to two months and must be continually renewed. These bureaucratic delays undermine access to even basic healthcare, particularly for UAMs living outside formal reception structures.

Another stakeholder recounted the case of a 16-year-old Moroccan boy who, despite being eligible for placement under the *Service de l'Aide à la Jeunesse* (SAJ – youth welfare service), was left without accommodation due to a lack of available spaces. A local emergency reception center ultimately hosted him for a year, underscoring the system's dependence on NGOs to address institutional shortcomings.

Several stakeholders highlighted a broader systemic issue: the Belgian reception and migration system remains heavily oriented toward asylum. For so-called "wandering minors" or other foreign minors who do not intend to apply for asylum, there are very few tailored services or future perspectives for them. In this way, the asylum procedure—a federal responsibility—effectively becomes the main gateway to accessing rights and services.

The good practices shared by service providers had common aspects, such as an outreaching approach, collaboration with other organizations, the organization of easily accessible group activities, being able to focus on creating a bond of trust, being flexible, prioritizing human interaction before paperwork, focusing on building autonomy and social networks, trying to understand the UAM without judgment, and the creation of child-friendly tools.

"For me, our role is not to make young people dependent. I don't like the idea of "assistance" in the sense of dependency. I accompany them, I support them, but what matters is that I explain and show them: 'You are young, and you can succeed with your own efforts.' That's the logic. What's really great is that we can see their progress."

All stakeholders state that housing and homelessness are among the most concerning issues. Some minors (especially minors in transit, minors who have just arrived and haven't yet applied for international protection, ex-UAMs and wandering minors) are said to sleep on the streets, in squats or informal shelters (but those are often full). On the streets UAMs risk encountering dangerous situations such as drug use, violence, criminal activity, ...

For those UAMs that obtain a residence permit, the difficult task of finding an apartment awaits. Brussels's housing market is very competitive. With a lack of affordable housing and landlords often reluctant to rent to refugees, this takes a lot of time and comes with a big risk of ending up in an apartment owned by a slumlord. Some third parties try to charge refugees and UAMs for help finding housing.

"I think it's a structural problem, whether it's the provision of social housing or, in any case, housing for low-income people, which is the case for our beneficiaries, but also, no doubt, the need to establish a kind of rent scale in Brussels, because in fact it's becoming unaffordable in the private market in Brussels for the young people we support today. We are putting young people in studios at €750, excluding utilities, with an income of €1.400."

Experiences with police and law enforcement in Brussels were generally seen as professional and well-intended, especially those contacts with UAMs in the "official system". UAMs in reception centers for example are given a card, proving their residence in the reception center. When having contact with the police, they can show them this card.

Some police officers are said to reach out when minors are found alone or in transit. Police occasionally participate in educational sessions to explain their role, helping to build trust and reduce fear.

Most issues are administrative and standard (e.g. reporting of a disappearance) rather than abusive, though UAMs often carry trauma from encounters with border police elsewhere in Europe. Rare instances of abusive situations were reported by the stakeholders, such as minors being treated 'brutally' during arrests, or minors being asked by police officers to take off their clothes, or police officers approaching a traumatized minor in a very threatening way.

"By the time they arrived, the young person had actually calmed down quite a bit, but then he saw the police and that triggered his trauma. So he was back in overdrive. I tried to explain that... Anyway, the police came in with dogs, with a lot of fanfare, let's put it that way. (...) They didn't really listen, they immediately rushed towards him. They started questioning him. Meanwhile, he was sitting on a chair, rocking back and forth with his hands over his ears. You could see that the boy was just not okay. "

5.2.4. Experiences with age assessment procedure of UAMs

All interviewed stakeholders stated that they know the age assessment procedure although most have not taken active part in it. The age assessment procedure is often perceived as unreliable, with minors sometimes assessed as much older than they are, or vice versa. Some stakeholders acknowledge that there are probably people abusing the system by declaring themselves as minors when they are really adults, but have ethical objections to the procedure. Several stakeholders were able to give some concrete examples of situations in which they felt the result of the age assessment procedure was incorrect.

> ***"Almost all had a doubt on the age emitted by the Office des Étrangers (Immigration Office), 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 note that outcomes of the age assessment are frustrating and sometimes harmful to minors. The process can be slow/burdensome, especially if legal action is needed to challenge results. Appeals to the decision in age assessment are said to have varying results, depending on the judge.

> ***"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."***

5.2.5. Experiences with discrimination and violence

Some stakeholders report that UAMs in Brussels face structural and subtle forms of discrimination, mostly administrative, social, and cultural, rather than direct physical violence within Belgium.

> ***"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."***

Most physical or severe violence is reported by UAMs occurring outside Belgium, particularly at borders of other countries. Some concrete examples of discrimination in Belgium that were given were: language discrimination in Brussels (UAMs learning Dutch often don't have access to social assistants who speak this language), dehumanizing or dismissive treatment of UAMs in some communes and by some social welfare staff, regular police checks (ethnic profiling), discrimination at work, differences in treatment of UAMs versus Belgian minors (the latter have easier access to certain services, due to language proficiency), discrimination by landlords refusing to rent to UAMs, banks refusing services to refugees (including UAMs) and schools orienting UAMs more quickly towards vocational schools.

One respondent reported incidents of violence against unaccompanied minors, describing brutality during arrests and racist insults by the police, false declarations of age on an Annex 26 document by the Foreign Affairs Office, and physical violence and dog bites by private security guards (Securitas) in parking lots.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A fundamental recommendation affecting many services based on the stakeholder interviews in this research is to **increase stable funding for associations working with UAMs**, especially for those offering social, psychological and legal support to UAMs and organizations that organize collective activities for both citizens and newcomers.

Coordination across governance levels should be enhanced. Federal, regional and local services need more alignment, reducing fragmentation and ensuring consistent access to education, housing, and social services.

Housing remains a key challenge in Brussels. Public authorities should invest in individual, permanent housing solutions tailored to the needs of unaccompanied minors (and their families following reunification) and young people transitioning out of reception centers. This could include supported independent living, small-scale dispersed housing units, and targeted rental assistance.

Housing and care arrangements should be based on an individual best-interest assessment and provide a continuum of child-protection options comparable in quality to those available to other minors: foster care or small-scale group housing with close support for those who need it, and supported independent living or small-scale dispersed housing for those ready for greater autonomy. Small-scale group housing should be located within cities (or safely accessible by public transport) to ensure access to schooling, services, and support networks, and should follow a non-segregation approach by integrating UAMs with local minors within the same services.

These arrangements should be complemented by targeted rental assistance, strengthened housing access support, and continued aftercare beyond 18 to prevent homelessness and exploitation and support a gradual, smoother transition into adulthood.

Educational integration of UAMs should be strengthened through a time-limited, transitional approach into mainstream education, rather than through separate or rigid educational tracks. This requires a more flexible and responsive system that addresses both access and quality. OKAN/DASPA exists as a protected entry phase for intensive language learning and orientation, while expanding capacity, better enrolment coordination, and providing more tailor-made transition guidance could ensure timely integration into the regular school system. Language support should be embedded in regular classes wherever possible, through hybrid models that allow early participation in mainstream academic, technical, and vocational education, rather than delaying entry to mainstream schooling through strict “language-first” requirements.

At the same time, efforts must focus on reducing de facto segregation by ensuring that all schools share responsibility for enrolling newcomer students and by strengthening guidance to prevent the automatic steering of UAMs into low-skilled vocational pathways, particularly when they have the potential to pursue academic or technical tracks leading to higher education. Teachers also require improved preparation for multilingual and multicultural classrooms, enabling them to recognize students’ abilities beyond their level of Dutch or French proficiency.

Finally, educational support should not end abruptly at the age of 18: continued guidance, counselling, administrative assistance, and culturally sensitive mental health support are essential to help young people remain in education and avoid premature transitions into low-skilled work.

Access to municipality services and social welfare were often seen as complicated and unnecessarily slow. **Simplifying administrative procedures** enhance access to services that should improve the welfare of UAMs. Services should be made available in multiple languages and provided in a child-friendly manner. If a service cannot be provided in multiple languages, an interpreter should be provided. Professionals working with UAMs at public service providers, especially those that do not exclusively work with UAMs, should receive training in specificities of UAMs (residence status, rights, trauma-sensitive care, and culturally sensitive practices).

Finally, urban municipalities can make a difference by **facilitating the involvement of the local civil society and citizens in the welcoming of UAMs**. Municipalities can offer a powerful, inclusive message to citizens in their locality and impact attitudes in society. This can again lead to better integration of UAMs in the city.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This local-level research focused on the city of Brussels and aimed to identify the unmet needs of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) and their access to public services. Based on the desk research and 25 interviews conducted, the following conclusions should be highlighted.

A profound finding is that Belgium's system to support UAMs continues to reflect a **persistent tension between immigration control and child welfare.** In practice, access to protection, housing, and social support—whether from the state or a non-profit organization—often depends on a minor's residence status rather than their needs. This contradicts the principle of universal child protection. "Wandering minors" (*mineurs en errance*), or those outside the asylum procedure, remain largely excluded from services which significantly impairs their wellbeing, potential for inclusion, and future prospects.

The system remains fragmented across federal, regional, and local levels. This fragmentation, combined with administrative complexity, often results in inconsistent access to essential services, including education, housing, healthcare, and psychosocial support. Stakeholders highlighted that while many organizations demonstrate dedication, flexibility, and innovative approaches in service delivery, the overarching structural constraints—such as shortages of specialized accommodation, limited access to mental health services, and prolonged bureaucratic procedures—persistently hinder the wellbeing and integration of UAMs.

Access to essential services in Brussels appears unequal and, in many cases, insufficient. While basic (and emergency) healthcare is guaranteed in theory, bureaucratic barriers (e.g. CPAS/OCMW procedures) severely delay access, especially for UAMs without a residence status or those in transit. Mental health care is particularly inadequate, with long waiting times, limited culturally appropriate or multilingual support, and too few specialized care facilities. Access to education (OKAN/DASPA) is also hindered by capacity shortages, language barriers, and age- or status-related exclusions. Language-integration programs such as DASPA and OKAN provide a supportive environment for newly arrived minors, yet their segregated structure, limited capacity, and insufficient follow-up pathways constrain opportunities for secondary and tertiary education.

Housing challenges and the transition to autonomy remain major problems. Limited capacity in reception centers, a shortage of affordable housing, and discrimination in the housing market make the transition after age 18 especially difficult, exacerbates social vulnerability and undermines the effectiveness of other support measures, including educational and psychosocial interventions. The lack of small-scale and individualized facilities forces UAMs to stay in overcrowded or unsuitable accommodation or to relocate away from their support networks.

Many UAMs therefore depend heavily on civil society and NGOs for assistance at local level. Organizations such as Caritas International, Maison Babel, Mentor Jeunes/Escale, and BelRefugees fill significant service gaps at the local level, providing legal, psychosocial, and integration support. However, their work is precariously dependent on project-based or unstable funding, and waiting lists are long.

Based on this research, **we identified a strong need for more structural and long-term support both at national, regional and local levels.** Stakeholders consistently called for stable funding, specialized training on UAM-specific issues for professionals, and simplified administrative procedures—particularly in healthcare. More bridging programs are needed to support transition from education to employment or higher education, especially for youth with limited literacy or language skills.

Despite these systemic gaps, several encouraging practices emerged. The guardianship system, to which all UAMs are entitled, serves as a crucial protective mechanism that facilitates access to legal, educational, and social services both at national and local levels. UAMs with active and committed guardians are better connected to the social fabric of the city. Similarly, OKAN/DASPA schools provide structured opportunities for linguistic, cultural and social integration, helping minors transition into mainstream education—though this largely depends on the age at which the minor arrived and their prior education level.

Many UAMs also reported neutral to positive experiences with police in Belgium. Some stakeholders noted that certain police forces receive training specific to UAMs, suggesting positive developments in community policing and professionalism.

The Brussels local network of actors working with UAMs forms a collaborative ecosystem —both formally and informally—dedicated to support minors despite systemic constraints. Professionals across institutions demonstrate deep commitment and expertise, and several interviewees noted that the Belgian system for UAMs has improved significantly over the past two decades.

Finally, many minors expressed strong motivation to study, work, and build their futures in Belgium, showing remarkable resilience despite trauma, uncertainty and unmet needs.

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