Do unaccompanied children have equal access to services in Europe?

Takeways from the EU synthesis report, and local research across Belgium, France and Greece

1 Unaccompanied children are often treated as migrants rather than children

Age assessment procedures can determine access to protection and services, yet their accuracy and transparency are widely questioned.

> *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.*
>
> *Unaccompanied child from Brussels*

> *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/social assistant is, that makes you go places [i.e. receive services]*
>
> *Stakeholder from Ghent*

The guardianship system is an important way for unaccompanied children to access their basic rights, but delays in appointment and variations in the quality of support remain.

Their protection and access to services should be guided by child rights, and not by their migration status.

2 Weak coordination among public authorities leads to gaps in support for unaccompanied children.

NGOs are often left to fill these gaps, but lack the mandate, funding, and capacity to ensure sustainable solutions.

In Calais, state involvement is limited, with most services being provided by NGOs. All state-provided services were implemented following litigation by associations, not at the initiative of local authorities.

Stronger coordination between public authorities is needed to ensure that unaccompanied children have equal access to public services.

3 Unaccompanied children do not have equal access to mainstream public services.

Education

Unaccompanied children face unequal access to mainstream education through segregated reception and language classes, discrimination, and limited routes to higher education.

> *You need 7 years to learn a new language. So you cannot say 'you first have to learn the language, and then you can enter my class. Teachers don't know how to see a child as clever [i.e. to recognize their intelligence beyond their current language or other ability].*
>
> *Stakeholder from Ghent*

Housing

Limited access to family-based care, including foster care, among unaccompanied children contributes to their placement in institutional settings and increases their risk of homelessness.

> *If I had had a tent and a sleeping bag when I arrived in Calais, I would have felt calmer.*
>
> *Unaccompanied child from Calais*



In Greece, more than 400 unaccompanied children were left in poor and inadequate living conditions in 2025, leading to a number of interventions by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

Health

Despite high levels of need, unaccompanied children continue to face insufficient access to healthcare, including mental health and psychosocial support.

> *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.*
>
> *Unaccompanied child from Brussels*



Our research in Calais found that unaccompanied children in transit try to stay invisible to survive. They often minimise their needs and say they are adults because they fear that seeking protection could stop or delay their journey. As a result, their rights are being violated on a daily basis

4 Unaccompanied children experience abuse and discrimination, while their access to legal protection and justice remains limited.

Child-friendly and accessible complaints mechanisms and justice systems should be guaranteed on an equal basis.

> *I was waiting to board the boat; the police arrived, everyone panicked. They [the police] threw tear gas, there were even women with babies. The canisters landed near the boat, and with the fuel, there was an explosion.*
>
> *Unaccompanied child from Calais*

In Liège, one child described how DASPA students were excluded from a school activity and made to watch a cartoon until it ended, limiting their interaction with Belgian peers.

5 At 18, support for unaccompanied children often drops abruptly, leaving many without continued access to essential services.

> *Since I turned 18, they forced me to leave the shelter; I suddenly had to stay outside because I had also lost my asylum application*
>
> *Unaccompanied child from Piraeus*

Aftercare support and plans should be provided after the age of 18, including access to housing and continued follow-up by the guardian.

In Athens, one young person explained that after leaving the shelter, they would stay with a family acquaintance for a month before having to "get back on [their] feet" alone. This shows how the lack of support during the transition to adulthood can leave many young people reliant on informal networks and exposed to housing insecurity and social vulnerability.

About the Power2UAMs project

Launched in 2025, with the financial support of the Citizens, Equality, Rights, Values (CERV) programme, the Power2UAMs project aims to ensure equal access to public services at the local level for every unaccompanied child.

To better understand the barriers unaccompanied children face in accessing these services, the project conducted quantitative and qualitative research across six European cities, namely Athens and Piraeus (in Greece), Calais (in France) and Brussels, Ghent, and Liège (in Belgium). The research findings were compiled into six local reports, developed by partners carrying out fieldwork, and an EU synthesis report bringing together the main findings and insights.

The partners

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