

## ITALY

**At a crossroads. Unaccompanied and separated children in their transition to adulthood in Italy**

# How do unaccompanied and separated children reach adulthood in Italy?

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## EDITORIAL INSIGHT

Reviewers commended this piece of research for its original topic and its innovative and nuanced conceptualization. It provides an excellent example of how to enhance and amplify children's voices in a participatory and youth-led manner, recognizing their best interests and the right to express their views on decisions that affect them personally.

Reviewers also commented on the report's engaging writing, its well-articulated and actionable policy recommendations, and the excellent application of ethical standards. The research also ranked high on the 'potential for impact' criterion as reviewers saw it as a welcome and topical addition to the evidence base on the current international politics of child migration.

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Fatouma, a young participant of UNICEF's entrepreneurship programme UPSHIFT, in Sicily. In 2017, the Italian Region hosted around 40 per cent of all unaccompanied minors in Italy.





**Migration is experienced by these boys and girls as an undertaking that establishes the full entry into adult life and the journey as a rite of passage.**

– Research report

From 2014 to 2018, more than 70,000 unaccompanied and separated children arrived in Italy by sea. Ninety per cent of them were aged 15–17 years, and many have since reached the legal threshold of adulthood – their 18th birthday – in Italy. Such a significant presence of current and former unaccompanied and separated children demands a better understanding of how to ensure their protection and social inclusion as they transition to adulthood.

This research, commissioned by UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), presents an overview of trends and possible pathways to adult life for this group of children in Italy. Rather than applying a simplistic age threshold, the research introduces the concept of 'triple transition': the transition from adolescence to adulthood; the dislocating transition of migration; and the transition to overcoming traumas experienced during or after the journey.

Recognizing children's right to participate in decisions affecting them, and taking care to protect their best interests, the study engaged former unaccompanied and separated children in the role of interviewers. This participative approach led to a comprehensive understanding of the multiplicity of situations, subjective difficulties, structural bottlenecks and support factors that determine their transition to adulthood.

## PURPOSE

The research aimed to build evidence on factors – at both the individual and structural level – that help or hinder the transition to adulthood of unaccompanied and separated children in Italy. Its objectives were to identify trends underpinning this transition, and the dangers young people face, alongside their expectations and aspirations. The research further identified best practices in protection, care and social inclusion that could be supported by United Nations agencies, Italian and European institutions, and civil society.

Development of the innovative project design was led by the Foundation for Initiatives and Studies on Multi-ethnicity (ISMU Foundation) in collaboration with the University of Roma Tre and University of Catania. Focusing on Sicily, Lombardy and Latium – the regions hosting the majority of unaccompanied and separated children in Italy – the research examined seven areas sharply influenced by a young person's legal status:

- access to education and vocational and on-the-job training
- access to the job market, and risks related to informal labour and exploitation
- access to adequate housing solutions
- experiences with volunteer guardians
- the role of formal and informal relationships
- relationships with families of origin and possibilities of family reunification
- the risk of onward movements.



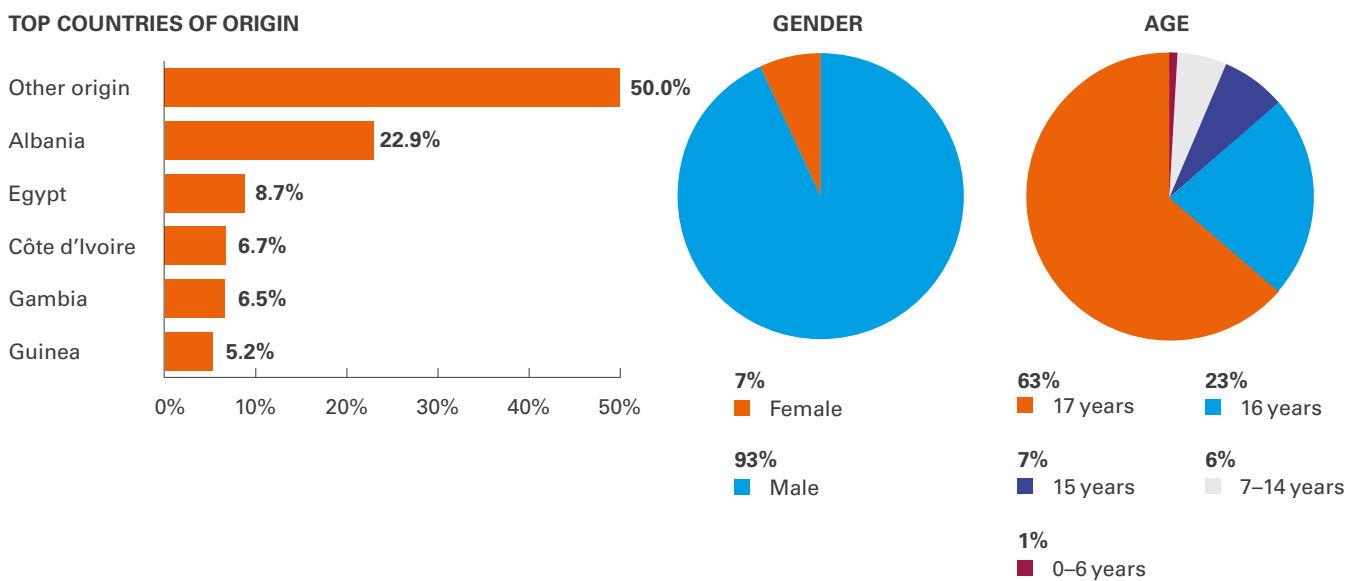
## APPROACH

### Mixed methods

The research design adopted a mixed methods approach. On the quantitative side, the research drew primary and secondary data from national and regional sources, to analyse sociodemographic characteristics and school attendance of current and former unaccompanied and separated children. The research also used online polls conducted via the U-Report On The Move platform, which captured the opinions of these young people on the education and training they received in Italy.

Qualitative data collection involved interviewing educators, social workers, volunteer guardians, and representatives of local institutions, Italian ministries and United Nations agencies. Three case studies analysed the positive impact of alternative housing solutions in Lombardy, youth centres in Latium and the volunteer guardianship system in Sicily.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Unaccompanied and separated children registered in Italy's reception system**



Source: Adapted from Figure 1. UASC registered in the reception system as at 30 June 2019 by main nationality, gender and age, full report, p. 25.

### Sharing life stories with peers

Central to the research was the use of a participatory biographical approach, including peer-to-peer interviews and focus groups with 166 young male and 19 young female participants. In line with this approach, and to achieve a comfortable, peer-to-peer interview setting, part of the interviews were conducted by a group of former unaccompanied and separated children. Eighty-five unaccompanied and separated children and 100 former unaccompanied and separated children shared their biographical histories in confidence, exerting full control over their own narratives. A multiplicity of legal statuses, backgrounds and migration pathways pursued was documented.



### Limitations

Only participants who could speak Italian, English or French were interviewed. While this streamlined data collection, it excluded some voices from the research.

Another limitation was the inability to document the stories of children who had absconded from reception facilities. Children in the system have volunteer guardians who can sign consent forms allowing their participation in research; absconded children do not. Only three absconders who had subsequently re-entered the system participated in the research, giving an indication of this group's experiences.

## KEY FINDINGS

The best interests of children in Italy are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and in Law 47/2017, which codifies child rights and protections for unaccompanied and separated children up to the age of 21. The Italian law includes provisions and support for social inclusion, education and health, but delays in related implementation decrees mean it has not been well applied.

The research found that bureaucratic procedures had left frustrated young people in limbo. Arriving in Italy aged 16 or 17, a child had little time to acquire a residence permit or international protection and begin a path to social inclusion and independence. Difficulties in receiving residence permits were common, resulting from slow, complex and often incorrect age assessments and long waiting times to obtain documentation.

Turning 18 years of age leads to a loss of rights enjoyed as a minor, with longer waiting times to convert the unaccompanied and separated child's residence permit into an adult permit for job-seeking, study or work.

### Access to education and jobs

The great majority of the children interviewed came to Italy with dreams of education, employment and a life beyond poverty. But they faced difficulties in acquiring training and literacy skills to foster their independence in adulthood. Furthermore, even those well prepared to enter the job market reported prejudice and discrimination.

Some children, especially girls, had left their countries of birth to escape forms of exploitation such as gender-based violence, family abuse or child marriage. Unfortunately, they found that exploitation was also prevalent in the Italian labour market. This could take many forms, from 'off-the-books' work as waiters, dishwashers or gardeners to exploitative jobs in agriculture or as caregivers, with uncertain payment and no contract. Criminal networks pushed the exploitation further, recruiting young people into drug markets and prostitution. Nevertheless, the young people's stories of work also revealed their ability to exercise agency and seize opportunities.

### Access to adequate housing

Both young women and men expressed a desire to live with dignity and without burdening anyone. While supervised independent living and family foster care generally proved to be positive experiences, stereotyping and mistrust on the part of property owners prevented individuals from renting homes independently.



### Relationships in the reception system

Violence had damaged the mental and physical health of many unaccompanied and separated children. Children had fled from torture, trafficking, sexual violence, exploitation in transit or after arrival, and other situations resulting in trauma. Their complex needs were often neglected owing to lack of formal support and specialized staff within the national reception system.

Young participants recognized the important role of formal relationships, such as those offered by the volunteer guardianship system and by other educational pathways. Female participants in particular appreciated the guidance of friendly and supportive educators.

### Onward movements

Structured support services for children ceased upon leaving reception facilities. The desire for better employment, to be reunited with family or friends, or for relief from overcrowded reception centres influenced children's moves from southern regions to central and northern Italy, or to other European countries, exposing them to the risks of an illegal journey.

Some children re-entered reception facilities elsewhere in Italy, believing they could access better services and opportunities there.

## INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

Discussions at the international, national and subnational level were shaped by the research report, which was launched in Rome, Catania and Milan. Through its 45 points of recommendation, the report urges a coordinated, intersectoral approach to help children navigate the triple transition.

The report's three regional case studies also highlight some best practices with potential for replication. Social cooperatives in Lombardy offer independent apartments, where the continued protection of children is combined with gradually increasing autonomy. In Latium, youth centres help young people build their social skills and networks alongside peers in an intercultural environment of theatre, music and photography. Meanwhile, a system of volunteer guardianship in Sicily involves children in creating tailor made solutions while supporting guardians in their role.

Findings were shared via UNICEF, UNHCR and IOM workshops and policy briefs, and through scientific journals and stakeholder mailing lists. The IMISCOE (International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe) Annual Conference, Ruppin International Conference, *Mondi Migranti* journal, Istituto degli Innocenti, Oxfam Italia and the University of Milan also disseminated the report.



**I have collected many different stories, but all united by two strong feelings: the pain and the desire to start again.**

– Participatory interviewer



**BOX 1****SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS****Italian authorities**

- Adopt policies that address the specific needs of young people who arrive in Italy as unaccompanied and separated children (including those who have since reached 18 years of age).
- Ensure effective coordination at the national and local level between institutions, develop an intersectoral strategy with the involvement of civil society, and improve data collection.
- Recognize the best interests of the child by fully enacting Law 47/2017.
- Promote safe and appropriate family- or community-based alternative care arrangements, as well as supervised independent housing solutions.
- Promptly identify unaccompanied and separated children, issue residence permits, and assign volunteer guardians with structured support.
- Ensure harmonization of standards in reception centres.
- Ensure all young people have access to information relating to, inter alia, their rights and obligations.
- Develop a national action plan against racism, xenophobia and discrimination.
- Combine training and professional opportunities with life skills building courses, improvement of Italian language skills and ongoing job market guidance.

**European Union**

- Ensure the timely, systematic and correct implementation of the Dublin Regulation with regard to age assessment and family reunification.
- Ensure effective cooperation between Member States in securing full and effective respect for the principle of the best interests of the child and continuity in protection interventions across European states, by, inter alia, adopting harmonized and appropriate procedures and an exhaustive data collection system.
- Ensure that Member States safeguard the rights and opportunities of young refugees in the transition to adulthood, taking into consideration, drawing from and providing effective implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)4 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States.

**Civil society**

- Increase opportunities for peer networking.
- Continue piloting and scaling up supervised independent living and youth centres.
- Continue managing services for those with specific needs, including survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, in collaboration with public authorities.
- Promote young migrants' and refugees' participation in decision-making.



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Omar, 17, in his reception center in Naro, Sicily,  
is a U-Reporter involved in the UPSHIFT  
entrepreneurship programme.

Source: Adapted from full report.







## LOOKING AHEAD

The research continues to inform discussions within United Nations agencies, Italian and European institutions, and civil society organizations about unaccompanied and separated children. The interviews with 19 girls informed another UNICEF analysis report published in 2020: *Making the Invisible Visible: The identification of unaccompanied and separated girls in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia*.

Thanks to its interagency nature the research has been embedded in UNICEF, UNHCR and IOM efforts to improve the protection and care afforded to children and young people in migration.

For UNICEF, these efforts include:

- the preparation of a note to Italy's Parliamentary Inquiry on Asylum and Immigration on child protection-related issues
- advocacy to highlight to the country's National Ombudsperson for Childhood and Adolescence the new needs of migrant and refugee children during the COVID-19 pandemic
- participation in an anti-trafficking round table to make recommendations on Italy's national anti-trafficking plan.

The three organizations continue to strengthen their collaboration in evidence generation in this area. Ultimately, this work will enable better-informed policymaking that not only respects but also helps to realize refugee and migrant children's rights to protection and inclusion.



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